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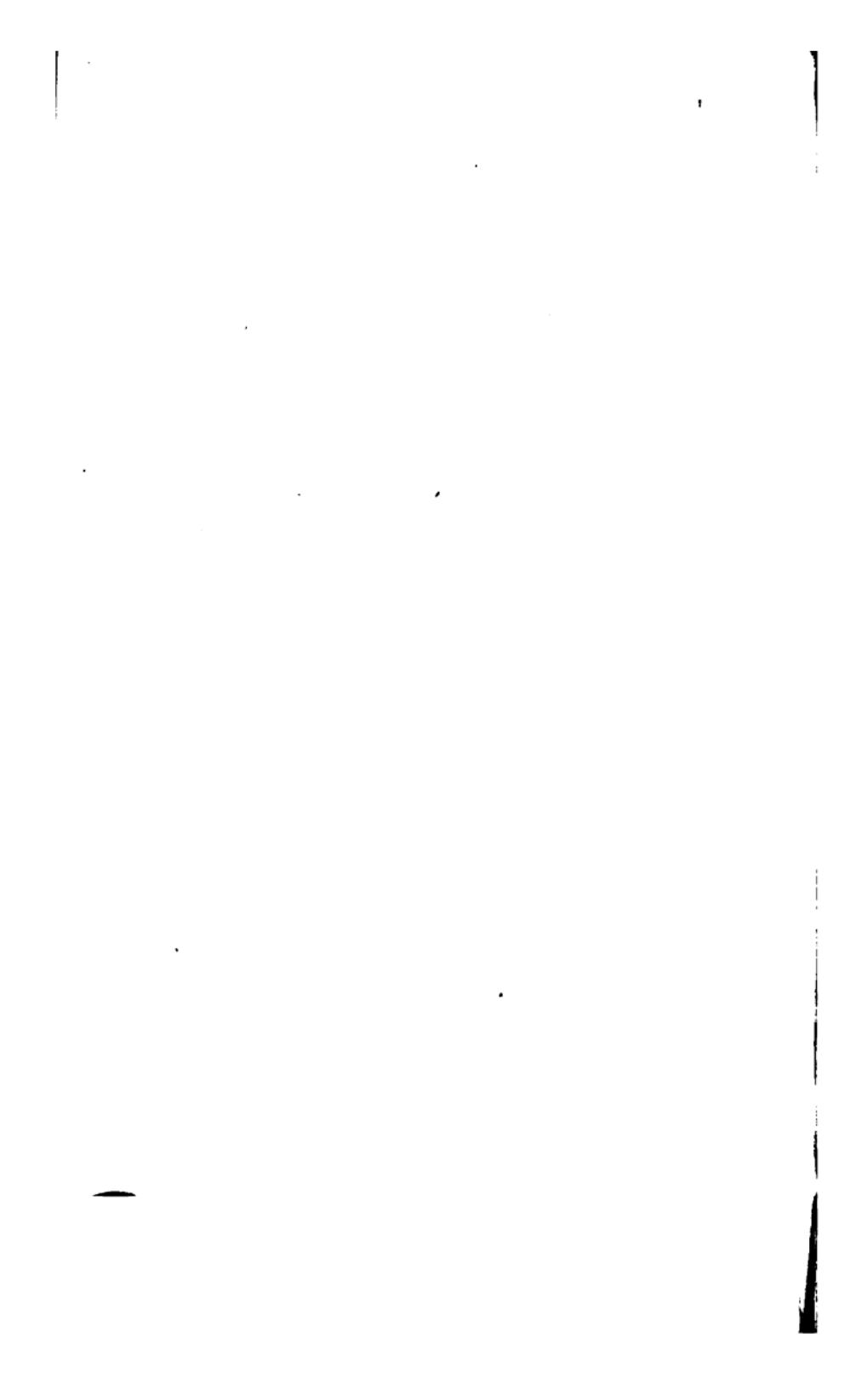
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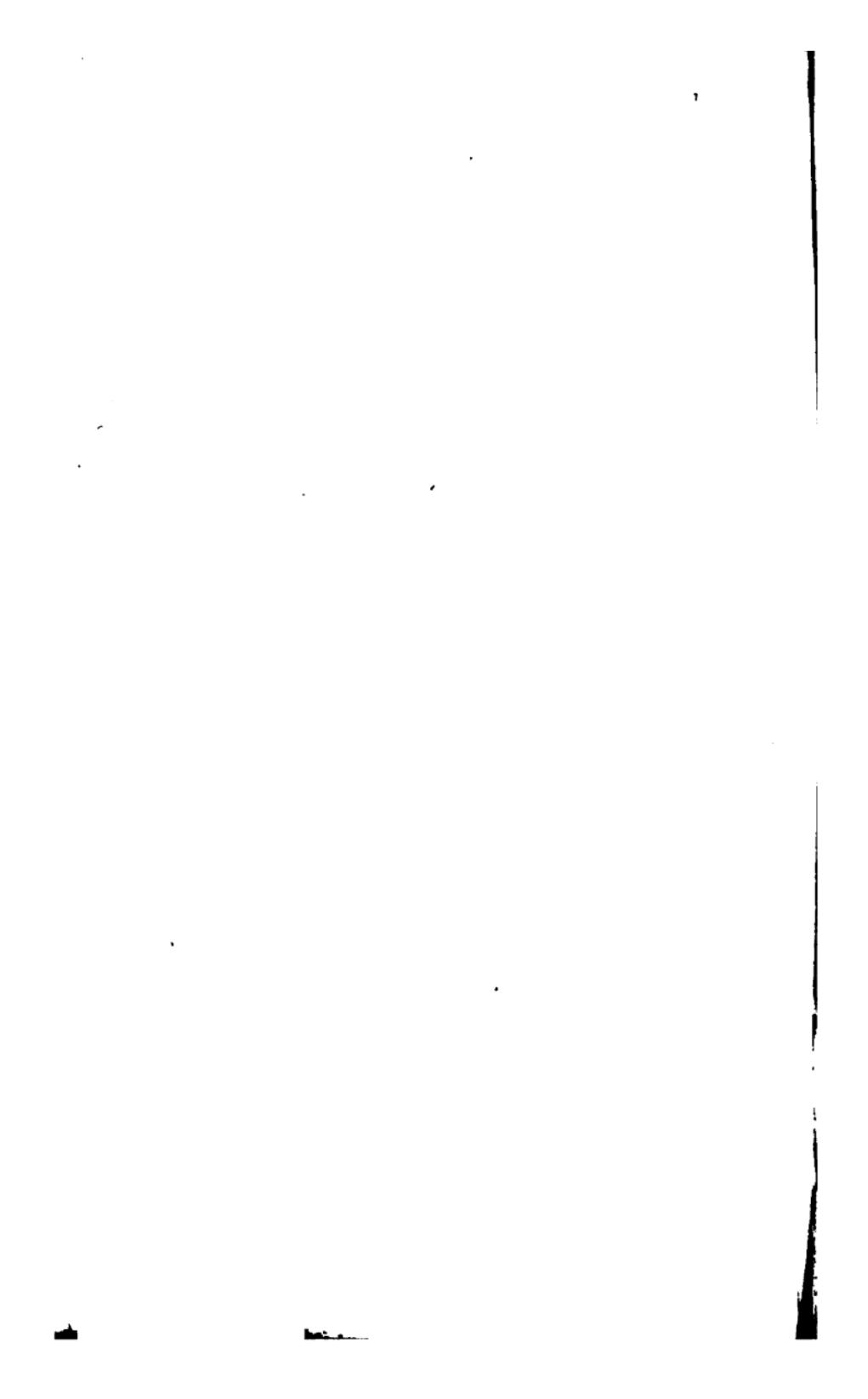
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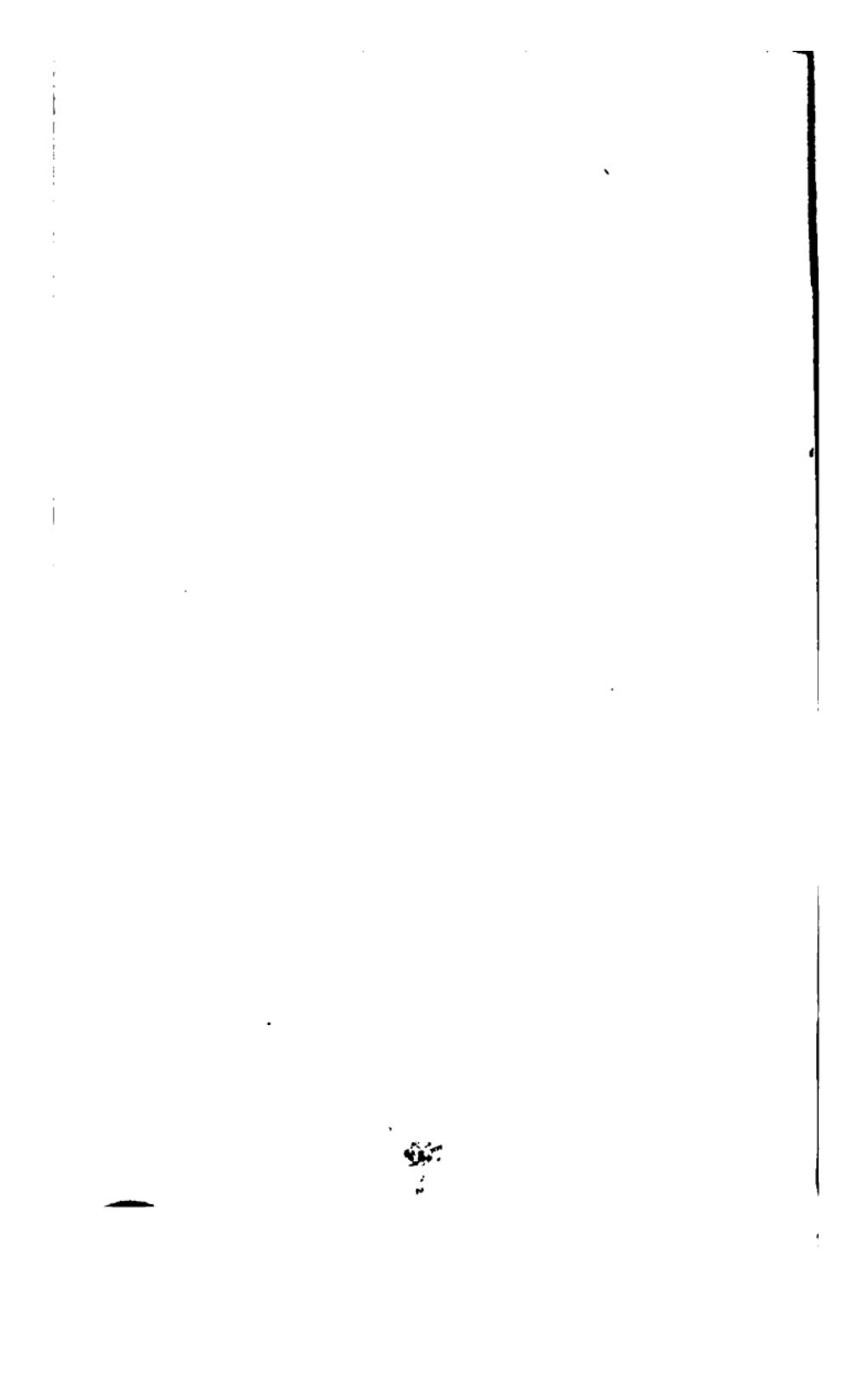
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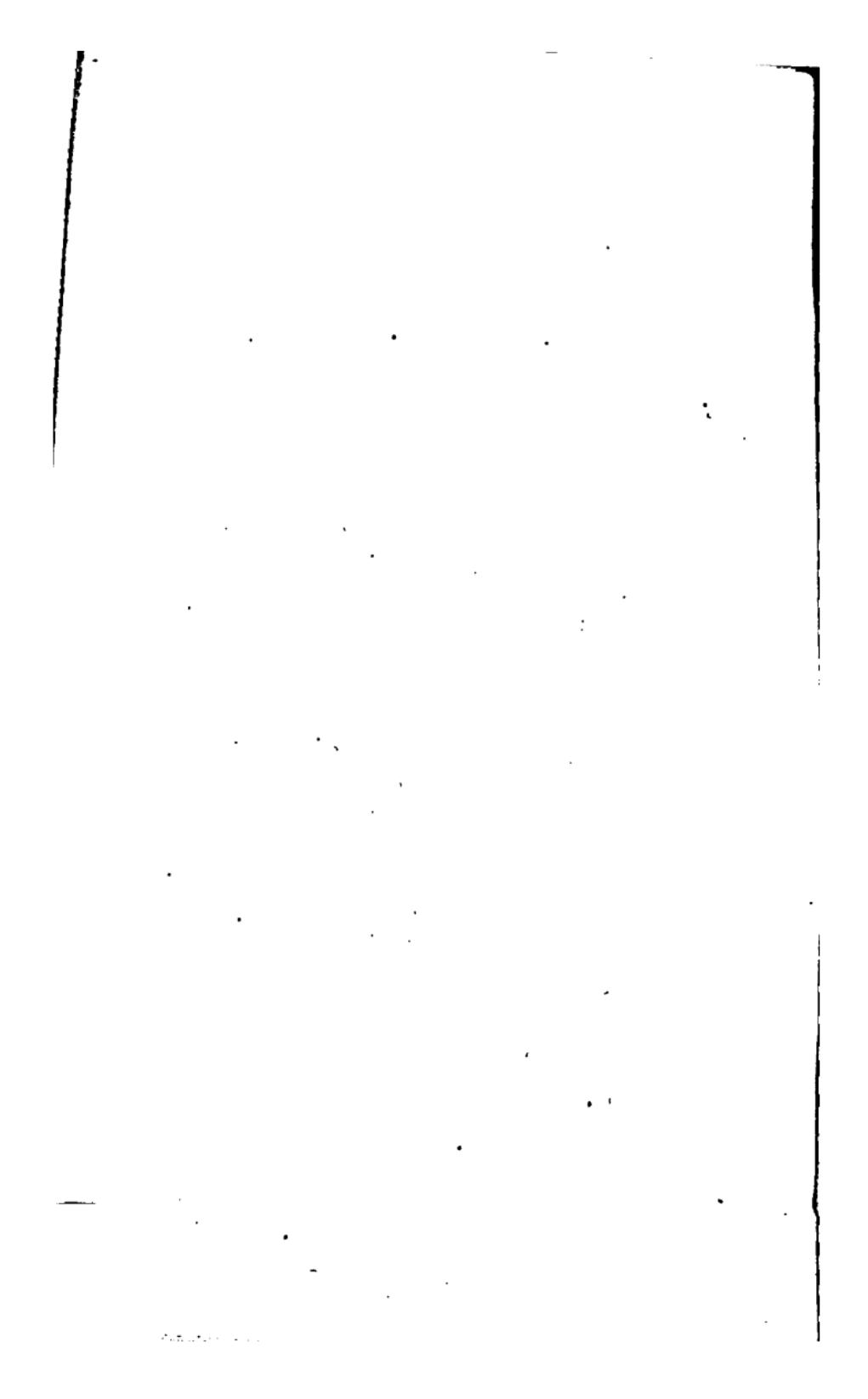








# **CHURCH DISCIPLINE.**



# CHURCH DISCIPLINE:

EXPOSITION OF THE SCRIPTURE DOCTRINE OF CHURCH  
ORDER AND GOVERNMENT.

BY  
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BOSTON:  
GOULD, KENDALL AND LINCOLN.  
UTICA, N. Y.  
BENNETT, BACKUS AND HAWLEY.  
1844.

Entered according to Act of Congress, in the year 1843,  
By GOULD, KENDALL & LINCOLN,  
In the Clerk's Office of the District Court of Massachusetts.

WEST BROOKFIELD,  
C. A. MIRICK, PRINTER.

*Gift*  
Tappan Presb. Ass.  
3-7-1932

## PREFATORY NOTE.

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4-2-32 LWS  
The following work had its origin in a request of the Ministerial Conference of the Cortland Baptist Association. The author, having read by appointment before that body, an essay, entitled, "Outline of an Inquiry relative to the Constitution, Government, and Discipline of the Christian Churches,"—it was

"Resolved, That in the opinion of this Conference, Br. Walker would render an important service to the cause of Christ, by writing more fully on the subject of his essay, particularly on the Discipline of the churches, and preparing it for publication."

Upon mature reflection, the author deemed it his duty to act in conformity to the above suggestion of his brethren. The almost entire neglect of Discipline in many churches, and the great variety of practice existing in others, indicating the absence of any well defined and established principles in respect to it,—seemed to him, to render a plain and faithful exhibition of the New Testa-

ment law of church discipline, a most important and desirable object. To what extent he has succeeded in realizing this object, must be left to the decision of others. He is conscious that the work cannot be otherwise than imperfect. Written, as it has been, in the midst of frequent interruptions, arising from the duties of a pastoral charge, it would be strange if its imperfections were few. Such as it is, he commends it to the blessing of God, and to the candid consideration of the churches.

HOMER, JAN. 1, 1844.

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AND  
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# CHURCH DISCIPLINE.

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## INTRODUCTION.

IN order to prepare the way for a profitable investigation of the subject of church discipline, it may be well to ascertain, in the first place, the scriptural constitution, organization, and government of a Christian church.

### § 1. CHURCH; DEFINITION OF THE TERM.

The Greek word *ekklēsia*, usually rendered *church* in the common English version of the New Testament, signifies any public assembly, or congregation, whether convened for secular or religious purposes. There is nothing essentially sacred in its meaning.

In the nineteenth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, it is applied, (ver. 32,) to the mob stirred up at Ephesus by Demetrius the silversmith, as well as, (ver. 39,) to the ordinary lawful assemblies of the people. It is employed by Paul, (Eph. 1: 22,) and by the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews, (Chap. 12: 23,) to denote the whole body of the chosen peo-

ple of God, from the beginning to the end of time. In 1 Tim. 3 : 15, and in Matt. 16 : 18, the term appears to include, generally, such professed believers as hold the Christian faith and practice uncorrupted, throughout the world.

It is most commonly used, however, in a technical sense, to denote some particular assembly of Christians, united in embracing the doctrines, observing the ordinances, and maintaining the worship of our Lord Jesus Christ. Such, obviously, is its meaning in Matt. 18 : 17, Acts 9 : 31, &c.; and in those passages which speak of "the church at Jerusalem," "the church of the Thessalonians," "the churches of Galatia," &c.

## § 2. CONSTITUTION OF THE CHURCHES.

If it be demanded, How is a Christian assembly constituted a church?—it will be found, from a careful examination of the facts connected with the origin of some of the early churches, that the answer to this question is in accordance with the above definition.

### 1. FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH, IN ITS INCIPIENT STATE.

The first instance in which a particular body of Christians is denominated a church, occurs in Matt. 18 : 17. Our Lord, in giving his disciples instructions for the regulation of their conduct in cases of trespass on the part of a brother, or fellow disciple, directed the person against whom the trespass should be committed,

after other prescribed means of reclaiming the offender had proved ineffectual, to submit the matter to the judgment of the *church*, to which both were supposed to belong. Should it be alleged that this rule was given by way of anticipation, and designed only for the members of a church not yet in existence,—it may be replied, that, in this case, the rule would scarcely have been intelligible ; or, if intelligible, that it would have been for the present impracticable ; thus leaving the very persons addressed without a rule in the case supposed.\* There can be no reasonable doubt that, by the *church*, in this passage, our Saviour meant the company of disciples whom he had gathered around him, and who, so far as circumstances would permit, waited upon his ministry. Beside the twelve apostles, and the other seventy ordained preachers, it is probable that many others, both men and women, may have been included.

Some of these had believed under the preaching of John the Baptist ; others, under that of Jesus himself. It should be observed, that John, although he baptized his converts, declined to collect them into a church state. (See John 3 : 26—30.) The design of his ministry was simply to make ready a people prepared for the Lord ; and it was reserved for the Messiah to give to his kingdom on earth a visible form and organization.

The characteristics by which the true subjects of

\* “It would be contrary to all rules of criticism, to suppose that our Lord used this term [church] in a sense wherein it could not then be understood by any one of his hearers.” Dr. Campbell.

that kingdom were distinguished, may be learned from the 18th of Matthew. They were such as had been converted, and had become, in respect to humility, simplicity, and inoffensiveness of character, as little children. (Ver. 3—10. See also 1 Peter 2 : 2, and 1 Cor. 14 : 20.) They were such as had been sought out, like lost sheep, and brought back from their wanderings to the fold of God. (Ver. 11—14.) They were such as had been forgiven, and as cherished a spirit of forgiveness. (Ver. 15—35.) A company of these, united in the common faith which they had learned from the lips of the Great Teacher, and associated together for the worship of God, and for the promotion of each other's good, under the authority and according to the law of Christ,—*were constituted*, it would seem, *by such union and association, a Christian church.* It was not the mere fact that they were disciples, that made them such ; nor the additional circumstance that they were baptized disciples, though both these were necessary ;—but it was the fact that they were combined in maintaining the doctrine, worship, and ordinances of the gospel, so far as these had at that time been prescribed. Their organization as a church was, indeed, only partial as yet ; but their existence as a church was already perfect.

## 2. THE CHURCH AT JERUSALEM.

In the first six chapters of the Acts of the Apostles, we have an extended view of the same church, divesting itself of the fugitive character which it had hith-

erto borne, and passing into a settled state at Jerusalem ; rapidly increasing its numbers and influence ; and assuming a more thorough and perfect organization. The great atoning sacrifice had now been offered ; and in commemoration of that event, the Lord's supper had been instituted and its perpetual observance ordained. The Head of the church, having given to his apostles specific commands for the regulation of whatever pertained to his visible kingdom, had ascended to his mediatorial throne. At this time, the church numbered about one hundred and twenty. By these, united supplications were offered ; an apostle was ordained in the place of Judas ; the word was faithfully preached, with the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven ; and thousands, believing, were baptized and added to the church ;—after which “ they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.” It is observable, that the persons converted on the day of Pentecost were made members of the church, by becoming united with those who were previously members, in the Christian doctrine and fellowship, and associated with them in maintaining the Christian ordinances and worship. Precisely the same kind of union and association which constituted the original body a *church*, now constituted these a *part* of that church.

### 3. THE CHURCH AT ANTIOCH.

The origin of the church at Antioch is more briefly recorded in Acts 11:19—26. In regard to the question before us, a review of that record will furnish

substantially the same results as in the case of the church at Jerusalem.: It appears that certain disciples, who had fled from the persecution which followed the martyrdom of Stephen, came to Antioch, and addressed themselves to the Greek inhabitants of that city, "preaching the Lord Jesus." "The hand of the Lord," says the inspired historian, "was with them, and a great number believed, and turned unto the Lord." Having become united in the faith of Christ, they associated themselves together for the observance of his laws, ordinances, and worship ; and thus became a Christian church. Any thing short of this would not, it is believed, have been recognized in the language of the New Testament, as a "turning to the Lord." When Barnabas was afterwards sent from Jerusalem to visit these disciples, it would seem that he found nothing defective or irregular in their constitution. On the contrary; there was in their state a manifestation of the grace of God, which became to him an occasion of rejoicing. He "was glad, and exhorted them all; that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord,"—evidently implying that they should continue as they were. Whether they had at this time a pastor, or deacons, does not appear. But however imperfect their organization may have been, they were distinctly recognized as a church of Christ. (See ver. 26.)

A farther prosecution of the inquiry, as touching this point, is needless. If the primitive practice is to be our guide, it is evident that Christian churches are constituted, or made such,—not by the decisions of

councils, or by the authority of any other ecclesiastical body,—but simply by being spiritually united in the truth to one another, and to Christ their Head, and voluntarily associated in obedience to his commands and ordinances, and in the maintenance of his worship.

### § 3. ORGANIZATION OF THE CHURCHES.

The officers necessary to a perfect church organization, according to the apostolic model, are bishops, or pastors, and deacons. The former are spiritual overseers; and to the latter, as stewards and almoners, are committed the secular interests of the church, especially the care of the poor. To the pastor, in connexion with the ministry of the word, pertain all the duties and all the rights of a presiding officer. He stands at the head of the church, not as an arbitrary ruler, legislator, or judge; but as its guide and leader, in carrying out the purposes of its constitution, under the authority, and in obedience to the laws of Christ.

In recurring again to the early history of the church at Jerusalem, we find that when the number of the disciples was multiplied, the distribution of their charities to the poor became a task so laborious, as seriously to interrupt the apostles in their more appropriate work. To relieve them from this burden, deacons were chosen and ordained, and the pecuniary affairs of the body were confided to their management. (Acts 6:1—6.) The presence of the apostles rendered the election of a pastor, as yet, unnecessary. Subsequently, it would seem that this office was filled by

James the son of Alpheus, and thus the organization of the church was complete. (Acts 12:17; 21:18; Gal. 2:12.) So far as we are informed in respect to the organization of other churches, they appear to have followed this pattern. (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:1—13.

The deacons of a church are, *ex officio*, its treasurers; and upon the pastor would naturally devolve the duties which are ordinarily performed by a church clerk. The discharge of these duties by a distinct officer appointed for that purpose, although nothing is said of it in Scripture, is found to be highly convenient; and in these days of instability in the pastoral relation, could hardly be dispensed with.

#### § 4. GOVERNMENT OF THE CHURCHES.

Particular churches, or assemblies of Christians, united and associated as above, are parts of the universal church, of which Jesus Christ is the sole King, Lawgiver, and Judge. They are subject only to his authority; they owe obedience only to his laws; they are amenable only to his tribunal. No example occurs in the sacred record of one church claiming a right of jurisdiction over another. Nor is it intimated that such jurisdiction was exercised by any body of churches, or of their representatives,—by any association, presbytery, conference, or bench of bishops. The conference held at Jerusalem, in relation to the matter submitted to the apostles and elders by the church at Antioch, is no exception to the above remarks. In

this case, it was not a judicial sentence, but instruction, that was sought and given. In fact, the decision of the conference contained an explicit disclaimer of any such authority over the brethren at Antioch, as had been assumed by certain men who went out from the church at Jerusalem. (Acts 15:24, 28, 29.)

During the apostolic age, the churches retained their independence of all human authority. Each managed its own affairs in its own way ; and each was responsible for its acts, only to Christ, the common Lord of all. Nor was it until the purity and simplicity of that age had departed, that their independence was invaded, and their freedom lost. The gradual working of the mystery of iniquity, mentioned by Paul in 2 Thes. 2:7, as even then in operation, at length prepared the way for those extended and powerful combinations, which, severally, have claimed to be the churches of Jesus Christ ; but which, instead of regarding his mild and equal laws, have set up each a despotism of its own,—a spiritual dominion, originating in corruption and usurpation, and perpetuated by means of ecclesiastical tribunals unauthorized by the word of God. By whatever names these tribunals may be known, or whatever powers they may assume,—whether councils or synods, conferences, consistories or assemblies,—whether employing themselves exclusively in judicial proceedings, or claiming also the legislative authority, and granting to themselves the liberty, as Calvin said, “somewhat to change” the ordinances of the great Lawgiver,—they must be regarded as subversive, both of the rights of the King

in Zion, and of the freedom of his subjects. Nothing could reasonably have been expected from them, but the very mischief and confusion which they have actually wrought.

The corruption of the churches in this respect, was not, however, universal. There was still a succession of faithful witnesses, who, without any other ecclesiastical organization than that appointed by Christ himself, maintained, even in the darkest periods, the Christian faith and practice in something like their primitive purity ; and who, therefore, under the opprobrious epithets of Nazarenes, Novatians, Cathari, Waldenses, Mennonites, or Anabaptists, were denounced from age to age, as obstinate schismatics and heretics. Among those, now known as Baptists, the original independence of the churches is understood to be still maintained. The decisions of their councils are held to be merely advisory ; and the associations and conventions which they have organized for the promotion of Christian fellowship, or for the prosecution of plans of Christian benevolence, are invested with no ecclesiastical authority. Should the Baptist associations of this country, forgetful of the purposes for which they were designed, assume jurisdiction over the churches, it needs not the eye of a prophet to predict the result. It would not be long, probably, before conflicting decisions of different associations would suggest the necessity of an umpire to judge between them. Such an umpire might readily be found in the State conventions ; and if any disagreement should arise between these, it might be settled by appeal to

the General Convention. Thus the Baptist hierarchy would be complete.

In the management of their internal affairs, the primitive churches were essentially democratic. From 1 Cor. 5:4, 5, and 2 Cor. 2:7, 8, it is evident that in the expulsion and restoration of offenders, the body acted jointly, each member being entitled to a voice; nor is there any reason to doubt that the admission of new members was conducted in a similar manner. (Rom. 14:1; Gal. 5:10, 12, and 6:1.) The deacons mentioned in Acts 6:5, 6, were first chosen by "the whole multitude of the disciples" embraced in the church at Jerusalem, and afterwards ordained by the apostles. In the churches of Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch in Pisidia, Paul and Barnabas appear to have presided at the election of elders, or pastors; who were chosen, as the original word, *χειροτονίσαντες*, implies, by holding up the hand. (Acts 14:23.) In 2 Cor. 8:19, compared with 1 Cor. 16:3, we have an example of the transaction of ordinary business in the same way. It is obvious, then, that the pastoral authority could not, without usurpation, be so extended as to infringe upon the democratic character of the churches.

The strong language employed in some passages to denote that authority, may, perhaps, be thought incompatible with the views here expressed. But if that language be examined, it will be found susceptible of a milder interpretation than is suggested by the common version. The term, for example, rendered *governments*, in 1 Cor. 12:28, might with equal propriety

have been rendered *directors*, or *superintendents*. In like manner, the phrase rendered “them that have the rule over you,” in Heb. 13:7, 17, 24, evidently signifies no more than “them that preside over, direct, and lead the way before you.” Such, in point of fact, was the office of the primitive bishops. It was their business, not to rule imperiously, as lords over God’s heritage; but, as faithful shepherds, to watch over, instruct, and guide the flock, and by their own examples to lead the way. “The princes of the Gentiles,” said our Lord to his disciples, “exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them; but it shall not be so among you; but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister, and whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant.” (Matt. 20:25—27.)

Happy would it have been for the churches, if this injunction had been uniformly obeyed. At an early period, however, encroachments were made upon their rights. “The government was transferred into the hands of the officers, or, more properly speaking, was assumed by them; and in the second century, some of their number, arrogating to themselves exclusively the title of *bishops*, acquired a superiority over the other presbyters,—though these, and, in many cases, all the members of the churches, retained some share in the government. The bishops residing in the capitals of provinces soon acquired a superiority over the provincial bishops, and were called *metropolitans*. They, in their turn, became subject to a still higher order, termed *patriarchs*; and thus a complete aristocratic consti-

tution was formed, which continues in the Greek church to this day; but in the Latin it was speedily transformed into a Monarchy, centering in the person of the Pope.”\* To this it may be added, that the aristocratic principle thus introduced, is still, to a greater or less extent, retained in most of the protestant denominations.

Such an assumption of power on the part of the ministry, and such a distinction in that ministry of bishops from presbyters, as are noticed in the above extract, must be regarded as altogether unscriptural. Both are decidedly rebuked in 1 Peter 5:1—3, where the terms bishop, or overseer, (in Greek ἐπίσκοπος,) and elder, or presbyter, (in Greek πρεσβύτερος,) are applied indiscriminately to the same class of functionaries. “The *elders* (or *presbyters*) which are among you, I exhort, who am also an *elder*, (or *presbyter*,) and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed: feed [as a shepherd, or pastor] the flock of God which is among you, taking the *oversight* (or *episcopacy*, i. e. exercising the office of a *bishop*) thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; neither as being *lords* over God’s heritage, but being ensamples to the flock.” See also Acts 20:17, 28, where the *elders* (or *presbyters*) of the church at Ephesus are exhorted to take heed to all the flock, over which the Holy Ghost had made them *overseers*, (or *bishops*.)

\* Encyc. Rel. Knowledge, pp. 619—30.

Rightfully, then, the churches can be subjected to no government but that of Jesus Christ. So far as human authority is concerned, they are free corporations; not governed, but acting voluntarily, *each member being entitled to an equal voice*. If pastors assume an arbitrary control over the churches, they are usurpers; if, on the contrary, they yield a servile submission to the churches, they are recreants. Their office is one, neither of dominion, nor of vassalage; but of guardianship, instruction, and guidance.

The foregoing sketch, the writer is aware, contains but a meagre view of matters so important as the constitution, organization, and government of a Christian church,—matters which every Christian, and especially every Baptist, ought thoroughly to understand. A more extended discussion of them here, it was thought, would be out of place. So much, however, was deemed suitable, as introductory to the subject of CHURCH DISCIPLINE, to which we now proceed.

#### § 5. THE TRUE IDEA OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE.

A body of soldiers may be said to be well disciplined, not when the court martial is constantly busy in repressing acts of insubordination among them, but when they are so generally observant of the orders of their commander, and of all the military regulations under which they are placed, that there are few such acts to be repressed. In speaking of the discipline of an army, we of course embrace in our meaning the

correction of military offences. But this is not the whole of our meaning. We include in it, also, that process of military instruction and training, by which soldiers are formed, and fitted for active and efficient service; and by which, in performing that service, whether in the camp or the field, they are all brought to regulate their movements by a common rule.

In like manner, a family may be said to be well disciplined, not when punishment is frequent, but when the parental authority is so habitually regarded that the necessity of punishment is rare. Indeed, the frequent recurrence of such a necessity, however promptly it may be met, is an indication of previous negligence, in respect to a nobler, if not a more important branch of family discipline. Let children be faithfully trained up, from the first, in the way they should go; and when they have become accustomed to that way, they will seldom depart from it. The necessity of that corrective discipline which is designed to reclaim them from the ways they should not go, will thus, in a great measure, be obviated. If they are formed aright,—if they are made to understand their filial and fraternal obligations, and trained, by exercise, to the proper discharge of these obligations,—there will be little occasion to reform them. And in no other way can the true idea of family discipline be realized. Without this, chastisement may be inflicted, as often as the caprice of the parent may dictate; but it is not discipline.

These examples may aid us in obtaining a clear, and at the same time a sufficiently comprehensive view

of the subject before us. We may say of a Christian church, that it is well disciplined, not when perpetually engaged in efforts to reclaim offenders, but when there are few offenders to be reclaimed. That notion of church discipline, which regards it as pertaining entirely, or chiefly, to the settlement of difficulties, and the treatment of cases of delinquency, is altogether too limited. It takes a far wider range. It embraces such a judicious administration of the laws of Christ in his visible kingdom, and such a training of his subjects to habits of active obedience, that difficulties and delinquencies shall scarcely be known. Like military and family discipline, it includes a formative, as well as a corrective, or reformatory process. It aims at the security and advancement of those who stand, as well as the recovery of those who have fallen ; and takes in the whole system of measures by which both these objects are to be effected. It implies, in short, nothing less than a full and faithful application of those scriptural rules and principles, which were designed to preserve the order of the churches, to promote the purity, harmony, and useful efficiency of their faithful members, and to separate the incorrigibly unfaithful from their communion and fellowship.

Such, it is conceived, is the true idea of church discipline. It will be seen that the subject naturally divides itself into two branches, or parts, which, for convenience, may be termed, as above,

- I. FORMATIVE;
- II. CORRECTIVE.

## PART FIRST.

## FORMATIVE CHURCH DISCIPLINE.

Under this head, we may include all the means to be employed for the promotion, in the members of a church, of a healthful, and vigorous piety. It is not the design of the writer, in the present inquiry, to enter into a minute and particular consideration of every thing pertaining to this part of the subject. A few suggestions of a brief and general character, must suffice.

## § 6. TERMS OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP.

The most perfect system of discipline, when applied to unsuitable subjects, cannot be expected to produce valuable results. A careful adherence, therefore, to the scriptural terms of church membership, if not strictly a part of the formative process under consideration, may at least be regarded as essential to its success.

A military officer, sent out to enlist and train recruits, will not receive the crippled, the paralytic, and the blind. He wants perfect and able-bodied men, who are capable of rendering active service, and of enduring hardness as good soldiers. The same principle is applicable to those who aspire to be numbered with the soldiers of the cross. None are wanted in

the Christian army, but such as actually possess, through the enlightening and quickening operations of the Holy Ghost, spiritual perceptions, sensibilities, and capacities. None are wanted but such as have been "born of the Spirit." (John 3:5, 6.) Every attempt to bring persons of an opposite character under the influence of a salutary formative church discipline, must necessarily prove unavailing. "The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness unto him; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." (1 Cor. 2:14.)

No government will admit into its military service, persons who refuse to acknowledge its supremacy, and who persist in yielding allegiance to a foreign usurper. Upon the same principle, before any can with propriety be enrolled in the sacramental host, they must forsake the armies of the aliens, and be reconciled to their rightful moral sovereign. They must cease to be strangers and foreigners, and be made fellow-citizens with the saints, and of the household of God. (Eph. 2:11—19.) The Lord Jesus wants none as soldiers, who, in the hour of conflict, will desert his standard, and go over to the enemy. Nor can it be doubted that he requires his associated disciples to guard with vigilance, so far as they may, against the admission of such into the churches to which they themselves belong. It is not theirs, indeed, to know the hearts of any. This, the great Head of the church has reserved in his own power. His people may be, and often are, imposed upon by a counterfeit piety, where there exists no true devotion of the heart to God. (Acts

5 : 1—10 ; 8 : 13, 22, &c.) But still he has made it their duty, in relation to such as seek a place in the visible church, faithfully to examine, and impartially to judge ; and to receive within its sacred enclosure those only in whom they find, or believe they find, the distinctive traits of Christian character.

The essential qualifications for membership in a Christian church, are *repentance* and *faith*. (Acts 2 : 38 ; Mark 16 : 16.) One of the laws of Christ, which his churches are bound inviolably to maintain, forbids that any should be admitted to membership, unless they give evidence of possessing these qualifications. A mere profession of repentance, in words, unsupported by any farther proof of a gracious renovation of heart, is not sufficient. Where it truly exists, there will be a brokenness of heart, and ~~a~~ contrition and humility of spirit, which in most cases may easily be discovered. (Psalm 51 : 17 ; Isa. 57 : 15 ; 66 : 2.) The appropriate fruits of repentance, also,—confession and forsaking of sin, and a cheerful performance of the duties of religion,—are of such a nature as scarcely to remain invisible. It cannot be right to receive into the churches, persons in whom these tokens and fruits of repentance are wanting. (Matt. 3 : 8.)

Nor is it sufficient that they make a mere avowal of their faith. The sincerity and genuineness of this exercise should be made apparent, by a course of action answerable in some good degree to the nature of the truths believed. At least, there ought to be a manifestation of willingness to enter upon such a

course. (James 2:14—26.) It cannot be expected, indeed, and ought not to be demanded, that converts, seeking a home in the churches, should be theologians, capable of passing judgment upon creeds and confessions of faith. In many of them, doubtless, there will be found a surprising degree of ignorance, even in relation to those first principles and rudimental truths, which to the experienced Christian are familiar as household words. Still, none who are of a meek and contrite spirit should be rejected, simply because they are unable to give a correct and satisfactory account of Christian doctrine. As well might hardy, vigorous, and patriotic men, offering themselves as military recruits, be rejected, because they are not already masters of the military art. The question for the churches to decide in regard to candidates for membership, is not, whether they have an accurate knowledge of Christianity as a system, but whether they have felt its renovating power. If they evidently love the Lord Jesus Christ, and if they are inquiring, like Saul of Tarsus, with an honest purpose to know and obey, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?"—their faith, however weak, is unquestionably genuine. (John 14:23; Acts 9:6.)

It may be added, that persons asking membership in the churches should evince a cheerful readiness to give themselves, not only to the Lord, but also to his people by his will. (2 Cor. 8:5.) There ought to be, on the part of such, a cordial recognition of the authority of Christ, as sole and exclusive, in matters of religious faith and practice; and a willingness to

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submit themselves to all the regulations which  
been pleased to establish in his visible kingdom.  
they seek to participate in the benefits of church union,  
they should not be reluctant to contribute to these  
benefits. If they share equally in all the privileges of  
the association, it is no more than reasonable that they  
should bear also an equal share, according to their  
ability, in all its responsibilities,—its pecuniary bur-  
dens,\* its spiritual labors, and its devotional exercises.

\* 2 Cor. 8: 12—14. “ For if there be first a willing mind, it is accepted according to that a man hath, and not according to that he hath not. For I mean not that other men be eased, and ye burdened; but by an equality, that now at this time your abundance may be a supply for their want, that their abundance also may be a supply for your want, that there may be equality.”

In the opinion of the writer, the obligation of each church member to bear an equal proportion of the necessary pecuniary burdens of the church to which he belongs, according to his ability, is a just and fair inference from the above passage. This inference cannot be evaded, by alleging, as some have alleged, that the equality insisted upon had respect, not to church members, but to churches. For if the apostle thought it right that there should be an essential equality between the churches of Achaea and those of Macedonia, even in regard to their religious charities,—it is still more obviously right, that there should be a like equality between different members of the same church, in regard to those necessary expenditures in which they have a common interest. Indeed, the man who seeks to bear less of the pecuniary burdens of the church to which he belongs, than a just and equal average system would lay upon him,—at the same time seeks to impose upon his brethren, *more* of that burden, by so much, than a just and equal average system would lay upon *them*. He seeks, in other words, to do that which must be regarded as a violation of one of the plainest principles of common honesty. With a view to cast odium upon the average plan, the disingenuous cry of “ Taxation !” is often raised by covetous church members; or, if the *injustice* of

The obligation to do this, should be distinctly understood, and freely admitted, by every applicant for membership; and he should know that in uniting himself with the disciples of Christ, he becomes pledged with them to the maintenance of the Christian ordinances and worship, to the cultivation of every Christian grace, and to the practice of every Christian virtue. Should any refuse to acknowledge and submit themselves to a rule so obviously just and salutary,—whatever may be their standing, wealth, or influence, the church is bound to reject them from her fellowship. She cannot be benefitted by the multiplication of members who obey no law but their own caprice; nor is she at liberty to sanction the solemn burial into the likeness of Christ's death, of those who are determined still to live to the world. The house of prayer must not be made a den of thieves. The communion of the faithful must afford no lurking place for wicked and slothful servants.

#### § 7. IMPORTANCE AND NECESSITY OF MAINTAINING FORMATIVE DISCIPLINE.

Whatever advancement the older members of a church may have made in spiritual knowledge and per-

that plan be acknowledged, it is sometimes captiously alleged that the expenditures of the church are extravagantly large. To avoid these evils, every candidate for membership should admit his obligation, not only to be on terms of equality with his brethren in sustaining all necessary expenditures,—but also, in regard to the question what expenditures *are* necessary, to submit to the judgment of the body.

sonal holiness, there is still sufficient room for their improvement. At the same time, there will be found in the younger, and especially in the newly converted, a deficiency in these respects, indicating that a formative process, by which the higher traits of Christian character may be developed, is urgently demanded in their case. It will be found that great numbers of this class have only a slight acquaintance even with the simplest elements of the Christian system, and consequently, that they are only partially under the influence of Christian principle. Many of them, doubtless, are well informed in regard to secular matters. Some have been trained up in pious families, or taught in Sunday-schools and Bible-classes, and have thus become, in a greater or less degree, familiar with the Scriptures. But there are others,—and in a period signalized, like the present, by extensive and powerful revivals of religion, they are not few, but many,—who have been raised up from the depths of mental and moral degradation. They have been compelled to come in from the highways and hedges. They have been gathered from by-places and neglected neighborhoods, where ignorance and superstition have combined to form a sort of semi-heathenism, and where the gospel has shed but a dim and doubtful light. Some have been rescued from the dominion of the man of sin; and many, very many, have been snatched from the yawning abyss of infidelity. These have in general but a limited knowledge of religious truth. They have only just begun to make it their study, and have yet, in many instances, to learn its first principles.

And yet, it ought not to be forgotten, that according to the democratic and scriptural constitution of our churches, every convert admitted to membership is placed at once upon a footing of equality with those who were previously members. Whether wise or unwise, whether well informed or ignorant, each is entitled to an equal voice in every decision of the body. Hence, the action of the body is but the combined action of a majority of the individuals composing it; and the character of the body, in like manner, must correspond to the general character of its members. It will be obvious, therefore, that great accessions to the churches, (especially if many of the converts have but a slight knowledge of the Scriptures,) must have an unfavorable modifying influence upon their character; and that the only way to save them from a rapid deterioration, is to instruct the new members faithfully in the doctrine of Christ, and to train them carefully to discharge the duties he has enjoined.

Persons recently converted always need such instruction and training. As a mass, they may be regarded as in a state of spiritual infancy,—as children in understanding, unskilful in the word of righteousness, and liable to be tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine. They are in their novitiate,—in the incipient stages, so to speak, of the Christian life, from which it is desirable that they should pass on to higher measures of knowledge and grace. The process of enlightenment and sanctification is, indeed, begun in them, but they need to be taught more perfectly the way of the Lord, and train-

ed to conform their hearts and lives more fully to his revealed will. They possess within themselves already, to some extent, the distinguishing traits of Christian character. "The Spirit itself," by the production of right affections, dispositions, and exercises, "beareth witness with their spirits that they are the children of God;" but it is essential to their highest happiness, as well as usefulness, that, by a blameless and holy life, in which the controlling power of Christian principle is perpetually manifest, they should bear the same witness before the world.

A faithful and diligent use of the means by which Christians are to be aided in their advancement to these higher grades of knowledge, piety, and usefulness, is what is intended by formative discipline. The importance of maintaining this branch of discipline will scarcely be denied. At least, it will be denied by none who have made themselves extensively acquainted with the spiritual condition of the churches, and have marked the consequences of its neglect, in the feeble, sickly, and superficial character which belongs to much of the piety,—if indeed it be piety,—of the present age. These need not be told, that the members of churches who actually grow in grace and knowledge, and acquire any considerable eminence as Christians, are comparatively few; while the many, when they have been baptized and enrolled upon the church book, seem to imagine that they have reached the maximum of Christian attainment. Years pass away, and it is found that instead of making any improvement, they have in fact declined from the freshness and fervor of

their early love. There is little or no enlargement discoverable in their views of divine truth. There is little or no perceptible increase of their spirituality. They may not be guilty of flagrant immoralities ; but they appear to be governed scarcely less by the maxims of the world, and scarcely more by the holy and benevolent principles of Christianity, than formerly. In seasons of religious excitement, they may be visited with violent paroxysms of zeal ; but these are of short duration. In general, they exhibit just enough of the form of godliness,—to say nothing of its power,—and perform just enough of the external duties of religion, to retain their standing in the church, and to avoid its censures. It is clear that such members can add nothing to the real strength and efficiency of a church. They may be truly regenerate. It is the part of charity to hope the best in their case.. But if they are embraced in the spiritual family, it must be confessed that they remain in the dwarfishness of spiritual childhood. They are still in the condition of undisciplined recruits, who belong, indeed, to the Christian army, and wear the uniform of Christian soldiers ; but who have never been trained,,or at least have never learned, to wield the weapons of the Christian warfare, and to move in concert with the embattled hosts of God.

Such a state of things, wherever it may exist, indicates not only the necessity of a more thorough formative discipline, but also the obligation of the churches to maintain it. Upon these rests the responsibility,—if not of the advancement of their members in Christian excellence,—at least, of employing the means by

which that advancement is to be promoted. It is not enough, that such as have been made disciples should be baptized, and gathered into the visible kingdom of their Lord: they must be taught to observe all things whatsoever he has commanded. (Matt. 28: 19, 20.) They should be made familiar with the great principles of Christian doctrine and duty; and instructed so to apply them as to discriminate between truth and error, between right and wrong. As the apostle expresses it, they should "have their senses exercised, by reason of use, to discern both good and evil." (Heb. 5: 14.) It is thus that the germs of Christian character implanted within them are to be expanded and matured; until, ceasing to be children, and putting away the things that pertain to childhood, they attain to the full stature, and acquire the full strength, stability, and firmness of perfect men in Christ; until, adding to their faith, not only knowledge, but virtue, temperance, patience, godliness, brotherly kindness, and charity, they exhibit to all observers a living and beautiful illustration of the power of the gospel, to produce whatever is pure, and lovely, and of good report. (Eph. 4: 13, 14; 2 Peter 1: 5—7; Phil. 4: 8.)

I have said that the responsibility of employing such measures as are adapted to effect this object, rests upon the churches. It is not intended, by this remark, to exonerate the ministry from obligation. Far from it. On the contrary, the ministry being one of the chief agencies of the church in all her spiritual labors, must of necessity share, in a highly important sense, in all her spiritual responsibilities. Still, it

should be recollected that the ministry is of the church, and not the church of the ministry ; and farther, that the ministry can have little efficiency, except in so far as it is sustained by the church. Ministers, unquestionably, are under greater obligations than others, in proportion to the greater influence which their official station, and perhaps their superior talents, may give them ; and their solicitude that they may be instrumental in "the perfecting of the saints,"—their earnest desire to "impart unto them some spiritual gift, to the end that they may be established,"—should correspond to the strength of their obligations. (Eph. 4 : 12 ; Rom. 1 : 11.) The language of Paul, in respect to this feeling of deep solicitude, as it existed in himself, is exceedingly strong. He tells us of toiling even to weariness, of agonizing, as in a conflict, and with more than mortal energy,\*—"that he might present every man perfect in Christ Jesus." (Col. 1 : 28, 29.) Of such as failed to make that progress in the Christian life which he thought desirable, he speaks of "travailing in birth again, until Christ should be formed in them." (Gal. 4 : 19.) He was unwilling that any whose Christian character was formed under his influence, should remain in a state of spiritual infancy and pupilage. He was anxious that they should speedily acquire such a measure of discernment and skill, as would not only secure them against the attempts of corrupters, but fit them also to teach others the way of truth. Hence, if any who, for the time,

\* Our version of the passage, entirely fails to exhibit the strong emphasis of the original.

ought to have been teachers, needed themselves to be taught the very rudiments of Christianity, he reproved and admonished them. He exhorted them, having laid "the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God," and having become settled in respect to the first principles of the gospel, to go on to perfection; no longer to be children, imposed upon and turned aside by deceivers, but perfect men, evincing the strength and steadfastness of maturity. (Heb. 5 : 12 ; 6 : 1, 2, &c.) If there existed, even in the apostolic age, a state of things which rendered such reproofs and exhortations necessary, it cannot be doubted that they are at least equally necessary in our own times. Nor should the spirit which prompted them be found in the ministry alone. It should be the pervading spirit of the churches.

#### § 8. FORMATIVE MEASURES.

1. Among the measures by which the churches should seek to promote in their members a high degree of knowledge and holiness, and thus to fit them for the active and efficient prosecution of every good work,—it need scarcely be said that the provision of faithful pastoral instruction is indispensable. The perfecting of the saints, or, in other words, their gradual assimilation to the character and will of their Lord, is one important object for which the pastoral office was designed, and to which those who sustain that office are bound to devote themselves. (Eph. 4 : 11—16 ; 1 Tim. 4 : 15, 16.) It is theirs to feed the flock of God;

to nourish such as are in a state of spiritual childhood, with the sincere milk of the word; to make them familiar with the more obvious truths and duties of religion; and thus, step by step, to lead them onward, until they are able, at length, to contemplate with advantage the sublimest mysteries of the Christian faith, and to attempt with success the loftiest heights of Christian attainment. This, it may be repeated, is one important object for which the pastoral office was designed; nor can it reasonably be expected that this object will be realized, to any considerable extent, where an agency appointed expressly for its accomplishment, is neglected, or undervalued. The absence of that agency in any church, was evidently regarded, by Paul, as a deficiency to be supplied. It was his custom "to ordain elders in every church" that had been gathered through his evangelistic labors; and finding this impracticable, as it would seem, in Crete, he left it in charge with Titus to perform that service, and so to "set in order the things that were wanting." (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5.) Hence we may infer the obligation of every church, to take such measures as may be requisite to fill the pastoral office, when vacant:

The writer would by no means assume the place of an instructor of his brethren, in respect to the best modes of discharging the duties of the pastoral relation. Still, he may be allowed to suggest, that the spiritual improvement of the churches will be most effectually secured, when these duties are not only faithfully, but wisely and judiciously performed. It is

not enough, that the advancement of all the flock, and especially of the younger and feebler members, be kept distinctly in view, as an important object of pastoral labor: the question, how that advancement may be realized, should be deeply and carefully pondered. It is not enough that the end be sought: the means employed should be adapted to that end. In short, every pastor should arrange according to his best judgment, and prosecute with unwearied diligence, such a system of formative measures, as he has reason to believe best calculated to promote the growth of the weaker disciples in sound scriptural knowledge, and practical piety; and at the same time, to aid such as have already made considerable progress, in their advance to still higher attainments.

2. Perhaps no one means would be found more happily adapted to the end in view, than a thorough, well-managed course of Bible-class instruction,—provided the attendance of those who most need that instruction, could be secured. The pastor, however, who would have his people reap the full benefit of a measure of this kind, must be willing to devote to it the full amount of attention and laborious study which it demands. If he would meet his pupils to any good purpose, he must not be satisfied with a slight and hasty preparation; he must take nothing upon trust, from commentaries, or systems of divinity;—but weigh every expression for himself, marking its connexion, and carefully ascertaining its true meaning; “searching into the scriptures, digging, with the patient investigating spirit of the miner, into hidden

treasures of unsearchable riches."\* Superficial study will lead unavoidably to superficial teaching; and the inefficiency of such culture will be manifest in its meagre results. To avoid this evil, the portion of Scripture to be considered at any one time, should be so short as to admit of a thorough examination of all its parts, together with a copious illustration of the leading truths, and a suitable enforcement of the practical lessons contained in it. Every point should be stated clearly, and definitely, just as it is; and whatever may seem obscure, or doubtful, should be explained, if practicable, by parallel passages, - "comparing Scripture with Scripture." Let the method of instruction here indicated, be regularly and perseveringly pursued; let the facts and principles, the precepts and examples of the New Testament, be contemplated in the order in which they stand, with all their harmonious relations, and mutual dependencies, until some considerable portion of the Christian oracles has been thoroughly investigated; and, through the favor of Him with whom it rests to give the increase, the richest fruits may be anticipated. The Christian student who receives the word thus dispensed with readiness of mind, and carefully applies it to his own character and life, will grow in grace and knowledge, and exemplify in himself the salutary effects of the formative process we are commanding.

It is certainly to be regretted, that this mode of instruction cannot be brought to bear upon the mem-

\* Bridges' Christian Ministry, vol. i. p. 76.

bers of the churches generally; and especially, that such as have profited little by any other, should be the last to appreciate its value. In most cases, the many seem content that the advantages of the Bible-class, whatever they may be, should be enjoyed exclusively by the few. Nay, the least intelligent and spiritual are often the most reluctant to avail themselves of this means of increasing their knowledge and piety. Ashamed of their low attainments, averse to the mental labor essential to any decided improvement, and impatient, perhaps, of the spiritual light by which their spiritual delinquencies are reproved,—they satisfy themselves with waiting merely upon the public ministrations of the sanctuary, and leave the broad field of scriptural research and investigation to be explored by others.

To secure, in these, such an acquaintance with the sacred oracles as may tend to their edification, and advancement in practical godliness,—something more is requisite than the ordinary method of preaching from a single, isolated text, selected at discretion, and frequently used merely as a convenient motto. Let the same kind of instruction usually imparted in Bible-classes, be given in an extended course of familiar expository lectures, addressed to the public assembly, where no one fears to be questioned, or to have his ignorance exposed; and the good effected, if not so great in the case of a few individuals, will be far more generally diffused. In this way, the discussion of many important points, both of doctrine and duty, which might otherwise have been overlooked or neglected, will be secured; a rich variety of instruction,

adapted to the wants of all,—not only milk for babes, but strong meat for them that are of full age,—will constantly be supplied ; and it may be hoped that the disciples, thus taught, will evince, by a steady increase in knowledge, holiness, and active zeal, that “ *all* Scripture is profitable, for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness ; that the man of God may be *perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.*” (2 Tim. 3 : 16, 17.)

In addition to the above suggestions, it may be submitted, whether recent converts would not be greatly profited, by receiving from the pastor a more private course of instruction and training, somewhat after the manner of the ancient catechumens. A weekly interview with persons professing to belong to this class, whether baptized or not, might contribute essentially to their establishment in the elementary truths, or first principles of the Christian doctrine, as well as to their settled conviction of the imperative claims of Christian duty. It would afford opportunity to become acquainted with their religious experience, and spiritual state ; to administer, as might be needful, either encouragement or admonition ; to apprise them of their obligations, as disciples of the Lord Jesus, and as members of his visible church ; and to accustom them, by practice, to the various acts of social worship. At the same time, there would spring up in the converts thus instructed, as one of the fruits of an association so intimate and sacred, a strong and increasing attachment to each other, and to their spiritual guide. The writer may be permitted to mention his acquaintance with

a pastor, who was in the habit of pursuing the course here indicated. The results were such as might have been expected. He stated that the evening devoted to his catechumens, as he called them, was, in his judgment, the most profitably employed of any in the week ; that, in general, they held on their way, and grew stronger and stronger,—discharging their duty, not like disorderly militia men, but like trained and practised veterans ; and that some of them were already among the most spiritual, as well as the most active and useful members of the church.

3. It seems desirable that the formative process under consideration, should include a diligent inculcation of just and scriptural views in regard to the nature and design of the Christian ordinances ; and the obligation, based upon the authority of the great Lawgiver, to keep them as they were delivered. Nor is an accurate knowledge of the scriptural constitution, government, and discipline of the churches, less important. The apprehended charge of bigotry, or sectarianism, should not be suffered to deter those who are “ set for the defence of the gospel,” from declaring, in relation to these matters, the whole counsel of God. In a course of Bible-class instruction, or expository preaching, ample opportunities will arise of presenting them in the best and most effective manner. And the deplorable consequences of a departure from the New Testament rule, and from the primitive practice, as developed in almost every page of ecclesiastical history, may furnish conclusive reasons why these opportunities should be faithfully improved.

An essential part of the formative discipline which should be maintained in every church, is, the cultivation of a brotherly spirit. Each member should be taught to cherish a kind and sympathizing interest in the welfare of each; cheerfully to deny himself for the general good; and patiently to bear whatever may be borne, consistently with a conscience void of offence, rather than to interrupt the harmony of the body. (Rom. 15 : 1—3 ; Gal. 6 : 2 ; Phil. 2 : 2—4, &c.) The obligation of Christians to love one another, and in all their intercourse with each other to pursue such a course of action as love would dictate, is largely insisted upon in the New Testament writings. Nor can any pastor be accounted a faithful expositor of these writings, who neglects the frequent and earnest inculcation of a grace, which by the decision of our Lord himself, constitutes the grand proof of Christian character. “By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.” (John 13 : 35 ; 1 John 3 : 14.)

The object of this branch of discipline is not fully attained in the churches, until the authority of Christ, whatever may be the subject of his instructions or commands, is held to be supreme. While his disciples regard his revealed will as the exclusive standard and rule of every religious institution, and every religious duty,—they should be taught to acknowledge, also, in its full extent, the moral code which he has sanctioned, and promptly to discharge all the relative obligations which it imposes. That code is essentially one of benevolence. It demands of every subject of moral government, not merely that he should do justly,—this the

world itself demands,—but that he should love mercy. It condemns, as murderous, that cold-hearted selfishness which heeds not the cry of the benighted and perishing ; which forbears to deliver them that are drawn, either literally, or in a spiritual sense, unto death ; which passes, with averted eye and ear, the bound and bleeding victim, and says, “Behold, we knew it not.” It enjoins the exercise of an impartial and universal philanthropy.. Emanating from Him who was the incarnation of good will to man, it requires that all who would approve themselves his followers, should be distinguished by an active imitation of his free mercy ; that by such means as may be in their power, and as he has prescribed, they should attempt the relief of human suffering, in all its varied forms ; and especially that they should strive to convey the blessings of redemption throughout the dominions of ignorance and sin, and thus to cast the salt of divine healing into the very fountains of sorrow. Let the members of the churches be thoroughly instructed in the true principles of Christian benevolence, and trained to habits of corresponding action, and it will be found that there are ample resources for every department of the great work of evangelization. To prosecute this work, by a faithful use of the appointed instrumentalities,—however it may have been neglected,—has ever been, and still is, the chief business which should engage the attention and employ the energies of the churches. The command, “Go, disciple all nations,” is no less imperative to-day, than it was when it fell from the lips of the ascending Redeemer. And the

promise, "Lo, I am with you alway," is no less ~~sure~~ to be verified to all who fulfil the condition, than it ~~was~~ was to the primitive disciples, who were supported by it in their work of faith and labor of love. The evangelistic spirit, therefore,—by which is meant a readiness, according to the ability which God giveth, and in the station which God may appoint, actively to participate in the evangelistic work,—is an essential element, both of Christian character, and of moral power. It is the spirit of Christ; and if any have it not, they are none of his. It is the condition upon which his presence is pledged to his disciples; and without him they can do nothing. Let the authority of Christ be acknowledged, and his commands obeyed,—let every Christian, like the good soldier in a well disciplined army, be at his post, and ready to do his duty,—and no moral or benevolent enterprise will languish for the lack either of laborers, or of means.

4. In regard to all these matters, and whatever else pertains to the formative discipline of the churches, or, in other words, the just and full development of Christian character in their members,—much, unquestionably, depends upon pastoral fidelity. It belongs to pastors, as a part of their appropriate work, to instruct the ignorant, to encourage the feeble and desponding, to admonish the delinquent and slothful, and to "take heed to all the flock;" "watching for their souls, as they that must give account;" leading them forward in the knowledge of every truth, and the practice of every duty, by which their spirituality or usefulness may be promoted; and laboring by all means, and unceasingly,

that they may "present every man perfect in Christ Jesus." They are authorized, indeed, in the performance of this work, to claim the co-operation of the members generally, and especially of such as are qualified by age and experience to be teachers. (Col. 3 : 16 ; Heb. 5 : 12 ; 1 Cor. 16 : 15, 16.) And these, by their mutual exhortations and warnings, their watchful care over each other, and their earnest endeavors to be helpers of each others' faith and joy, may render essential service. But still, no such co-operation can relieve pastors from their own peculiar responsibilities. Upon them, as spiritual overseers and guides, the obligation is imperative, to preach the word ; to reprove, rebuke, exhort, publicly and privately, in season, and out of season ; warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom ; pointing each to the path of life ; and by their own examples, leading the way. (2 Tim. 4 : 2 ; Col. 1 : 28 ; 1 Peter 5 : 3.)

It should be observed, here, that the duty of instructing the disciples, with which pastors are charged, implies a corresponding duty on their part, to receive instruction. No church member should be regarded as fulfilling his obligations in this respect, who is not accustomed to attend, so far as provideuce will permit, upon the word, worship and ordinances of Christ's house. (Heb. 10 : 25.) There is in many a sort of capriciousness in regard to this duty,—a habit of doing as they please,—of most pernicious tendency, and deserving of most decided rebuke. Whether these lawless ones are found with their brethren, either in the sanctuary, or in their more private occasional meetings

for business or devotion, depends, not upon any settled principles of action to which they feel themselves bound to adhere, but altogether upon their own inclination. They acknowledge no subordination ; they conform to no rule. Such a course, on the part of church members, cannot fail to be injurious, both to their own spiritual interests, and to those of the body to which they belong. It disheartens the pastor, and leaves him to labor in uncertainty, and often in vain. However faithfully and ably he may preach the word, and however carefully his instructions may be adapted to the wants of the flock, it can avail nothing to those who are not there to hear.

5. The success of any measure, or system of measures, by which the spiritual advancement of the younger members of a church is sought, may be greatly promoted by the examples of their older brethren. Or, on the other hand, these examples may be such as to exert upon the newly converted, a blighting and withering influence, and actually to retard their growth in grace and knowledge. We are creatures of imitation. The ambition of the boy is, that he may be like his father. The mother's image is stamped upon her child. So in spiritual things, the general character and habits of the fathers and mothers in Israel are the models, after which the sons and daughters will be likely to form their own. Pastors are not alone responsible in this matter. It is theirs to instruct the young disciples in all the principles and duties of Christianity ; but it is needful, also, that an exemplification of these principles and duties should be furnished,

in the consistent, blameless, and useful piety of the older members. It belongs to pastors, as subalterns under the great Captain of salvation, to train the new recruits of the Christian army, to teach them the use of the spiritual weapons, and to explain the rule by which their movements should be regulated; but it belongs equally to the older members, as practised soldiers of the cross, to set before these new recruits a pattern, both of what they should do, and of what they should become. The uniform exhibition of such a pattern, by a band of Christian disciples, must be highly favorable in its influence upon the converts who, from time to time, may be added to their number. Nor is it less true, that the absence of such a pattern must produce a contrary effect. Example, in this case, whether good or evil, will be found to possess a rapidly assimilating power.

To illustrate,—Suppose a church of one hundred members receives an accession of forty. The pastor, having baptized the newly discipled, proceeds in accordance with the great commission, to instruct them more perfectly in the way of the Lord, teaching them to observe all things whatsoever he has commanded. (Matt. 28: 19, 20.) As they become familiar with the precepts which define their obligations, as subjects of the King in Zion, they naturally look to the brethren who were in Christ before them, for an exemplification of the duties enjoined. Happily, they do not look in vain. They find themselves associated with a peculiar people,—with men and women of strong faith, and ardent zeal; prompt in the discharge of

every duty; ready to engage in every good work; and evincing, by sober, righteous, and godly lives, that they have indeed been redeemed from their vain conversation. A high degree of spirituality, and of holy consecration to Christ, pervades the body. In the public assembly, in the church conference, and in the business meeting, the members are at their posts, prepared to hear or to speak, to pray or to act, as circumstances may require. The Bible-class, the Sunday-school, and the prayer meeting, are all sustained. None of the interests of the church, either spiritual or temporal, are neglected; and none of the claims of Christian benevolence are unheeded. It is evident that the brethren love the Lord, and that they delight in his worship, and in his service. And they love each other. Bound together by the ties of fraternal sympathy, pursuing, each in his sphere, a common object, and participating in a common hope,—they rejoice in each other's joy, and present the lovely and attractive spectacle of a band of brethren dwelling together in unity.

Can it be doubted that the forty converts will be greatly benefitted by so bright an exhibition of Christian example? Is it not reasonable to believe that pastoral instruction, thus illustrated, will exert upon them an augmented power? Will they not learn, in the contemplation of that example, to aspire to the same exalted measure of Christian excellence? And will they not be aided by it, in the cultivation of a vigorous and manly piety?

Suppose, now, a church of different character. In

numbers, it is equal to the other ; it has an equally able and faithful pastor ; and it receives an equal accession of converts, who are equally susceptible of the influence of Christian example. But here, the parallel between the two is at an end. The latter is characterized by spiritual feebleness, and inefficiency. Its members are slothful, remiss in duty, and especially reluctant to bear any active part in social worship. Many of them are habitually absent from the Sabbath assembly. Not more than twenty, or twenty-five, can be induced to attend a weekly church conference ; and most of these come together, not as actors, but as spectators. A few formal prayers are offered, and a few heartless exhortations are given, with long intervals between, which are painfully occupied by the pastor in urging his brethren to improve the precious time. Some twelve or fifteen of the members appear at the regular church meeting for business. One committee, appointed at a former meeting, has neglected to act ; another is not present to report. The subject of making provision for certain old arrearages is taken up, but nothing is effected. Brother A. and brother B., who have long been separated by a mutual coldness and jealousy, come to open conflict. Unchristian words pass between them, and they retire to brood over imaginary wrongs, and to prepare for future strife. A few of the brethren and sisters are laboring, in the midst of discouragements arising from the general apathy of the church, to sustain a Sunday-school. But brother C. is, in principle, decidedly opposed to such schools ; and most of the other

members, if they do not embrace his opinions, are with him in practice. The Bible-class is treated with similar neglect; and when the claims of Christian benevolence are presented, a ready reason why they should be disregarded, and one which is likely to be perpetual, is found in the fact that the church is already in debt for the support of the gospel at home. Then, instead of that fervent charity which constitutes the bond of Christian union, there is found among the brethren a spirit of suspicion and distrust, of bitter envying and strife, which will not fail to produce confusion and every evil work. (James 3 : 16.)

Now, what must be the effect of such a state of things in a church, upon the converts who may become connected with it? Will it not tend to repress in them every upward aspiration? Will it not diminish the influence upon them of pastoral admonition, however faithful? Will it not dispose them to aim at a low standard, and to rest satisfied with a low measure of Christian attainment? Will they not be likely to catch the unlovely spirit of their older brethren, to whom they naturally look for examples? And is it not morally certain, that they will pursue the same erratic courses, and exhibit the same repulsive deformities of character?

These are not fancy sketches, mere creations of the imagination, having no real existence. The originals are to be seen. The outlines of both, at least in every essential particular, have their counterparts in the actual condition of different churches. And the power of example, both good and evil, may be traced more clearly than words can express it, in the widely dis-

similar character and habits of individual Christians, resulting from the dissimilar influences under which they have been trained. How important is it, then, that these influences should be right! How desirable that every church member should strive, by his own example, not merely to sustain, but to elevate the standard of piety in the body to which he belongs! And how fearful the responsibility of those who, by the violation of any Christian principle, or the neglect of any Christian duty, are contributing to lower that standard, and giving to a similar violation or neglect on the part of others, the highest sanction in their power! Such are troublers of Israel,—children that are corrupters,—inflicting an injury upon the younger members of the churches to which they give character, like that sustained by persons reared up in disorderly and ill-regulated families. As a general rule, it can scarcely be expected that young converts will surpass the models they are accustomed to contemplate. They may be thoroughly taught; but example is more powerful than precept. The perfect rule of action may be plainly and clearly set before them; but they will seldom aim at a larger measure of holiness than is actually found in the leading members of the churches to which they belong. In short, while they are fully and faithfully instructed in the theory of Christianity, it is equally necessary that a full and faithful exhibition of its practice should be placed before them. Nor can any system of formative church discipline prove in a high degree effective, in which the two are not combined.

## PART SECOND.

## § 9. CORRECTIVE CHURCH DISCIPLINE.

However vigilantly a church may be guarded against the intrusion of unworthy members, and however faithfully the means of preserving its purity and harmony may be observed,—still, it must be expected that offences will arise. (Matt. 18:7.) There will be, in spite of every effort to prevent it, an intermingling of tares with the wheat,—of hay, wood and stubble, with the gold, and silver, and precious stones of the sanctuary. (Matt. 13:40—42; 1 Cor. 3:12.) Worldly men, taking advantage of that charity which believeth all things, and thinketh no evil, will impose themselves upon the faithful. Unregenerate persons, either hypocritical pretenders or self-deceivers, will find their way into the churches; and although their true character may not be known with certainty, save by the Searcher of hearts, until the all-discovering light of eternity shall reveal it,—the working of the corrupt principles by which they are secretly governed, will at times be manifest in their external acts. So it has ever been; and so, unquestionably, it will continue to be, until the day when “the Son of man shall send forth his angels, and gather out of his king-

dom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity.” (Matt. 13:41.)

Indeed, if it were not so,—if it were possible to guard the churches so effectually that none but true Christians should be found in them,—entire purity and harmony would not thereby be secured. The saints of God, in becoming such, do not attain at once to perfection. There is yet a law in their members, warring against the law of their minds, and sometimes bringing them into captivity. (Rom. 7:23.) They are exposed to temptation; they are subject to sinful propensities and passions; they are liable to prejudice, misconception, error, and wrong. Assailed by a thousand seductive influences, to which their own unsanctified affections strongly incline them to yield,—it can scarcely be thought surprising that they should often swerve from the high path of Christian fidelity, and that in some instances they should fall into flagrant and scandalous crimes. They do thus swerve, and thus fall. Deeply as these proofs of imperfection in the disciples of Jesus may be deplored, it is undeniable that they actually exist,—nay, that, to some extent, they existed in the apostles themselves. The misguided and presumptuous zeal of Peter in rebuking the Master, his base denial of that Master in the hour of his peril, and the dissimulation by which, at Antioch, he sought to shun the offence of the cross, are examples in point. And to these may be added the vindictive spirit manifested by James and John towards the Samaritan villages, their ambitious attempt to be the greatest, and the indignation of the other ten

against the two brothers, for a fault of which they were perhaps equally guilty themselves. (Luke 9: 46; 22: 24.) The same unholy dispositions in which these wrongs originated,—the same selfishness, pride, and readiness to resent injuries, real or imaginary,—still have place in the hearts of the truly regenerate; and though ordinarily held in check by the restraining power of divine grace, they are often productive of disorders, which can neither safely nor innocently be tolerated in those who have a name and a place with the saints.

It must needs be, then, in the present imperfect state of the churches, that offences come. Considering the discordant elements of which they are composed, the perverseness of wicked men and seducers under the guise of a hypocritical profession, the instability of self-deceivers, and the liableness even of sincere Christians to be betrayed into error and wrong,—it may be said that causes are in operation, which render it morally certain that there will be offences. (Luke 17: 1.) Trespasses will be committed, and strifes engendered; heresies will be embraced, and divisions fomented; and not unfrequently gross immorality will be perpetrated. To ascertain, as definitely as possible, what ought to be done for the removal of these evils, whenever they are found to exist in the churches, is the object of the present inquiry. The proper treatment of offences, as prescribed by the law of Christ, including the duties both of individual Christians and of churches, is what we term corrective, or reformatory church discipline.

### § 10. POWER OF THE CHURCHES TO MAINTAIN CORRECTIVE DISCIPLINE.

1. The power to maintain and exercise corrective discipline,—in other words, the authority to take cognizance of offences, and, after suitable means have been used for the correction of existing evils, and the reformation of evil-doers, to separate incorrigible transgressors from the communion of the faithful,—appears to be vested, by the law of Christ, in the churches. The existence of this power in the churches, is often distinctly recognized in the New Testament writings; while, on the other hand, no certain proof of its existence elsewhere can be found.

A slight examination of the sacred record will be sufficient to show, that the exercise of this power on the part of the churches is in accordance with the design of our Lord. No other construction can fairly be put upon his language in Matt. 18: 17. "If he neglect to hear the church, let him be to thee as an heathen man and a publican." The labors enjoined upon individual members of the church, for the reclamation of the offender, having failed,—the matter was to be submitted to the judgment and final decision of the associated body. At this point, individual action in the case would cease, or be merged in the action of the body. If, then, the offender resisted that action,—if he refused, or neglected to submit himself to the judgment of the church, and to repair the wrong of which he stood convicted,—he was henceforth to be

regarded "as a heathen man and a publican,"—no longer to be recognized as a brother, or accounted a fellow disciple ; but declared by a solemn act of the body to have forfeited and lost the standing which he had previously held as one of its members.

That this power was actually exercised by the primitive churches, is evident from 1 Cor. 5 : 3—5, 13, compared with 2 Cor. 2 : 6. Allusion is here made to a case of aggravated wickedness, known to exist in the Corinthian church,—in relation to which the apostle holds the following language : " For I verily, as absent in body, but present in spirit, have judged already as though I were present, concerning him that hath so done this deed ; in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, to deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.—Therefore, put away from among yourselves that wicked person." Now it is observable, 1. That the exclusion of the offender was expressly enjoined. He was to be "put away." 2. That the act of exclusion was to be the orderly, deliberate, united, and solemn act of the assembled body. They were directed, "in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,"—that is, by the authority with which, as a church he had invested them,—"when they were gathered together, to deliver such an one unto Satan." Such were the instructions of the apostle, writing as he did in the name and with the power of Christ ; and the passage in his other epistle, above referred to, shows that these instructions were

obeyed. "Sufficient to such a man," says he, "is this censure, which was inflicted of many."

2. There is another point connected with the case of the Corinthian offender, which ought not to be overlooked. It would seem that Paul's directions to the church in regard to that case, although communicated by letter, were essentially the same that he would have given, had he been present with them in person. "I have judged already," said he, "*as though I were present*, concerning him that hath so done this deed." He had given them his opinion of the case, and had pointed out the course to be pursued. His letter represented himself,—so that, though absent in body, he was still to all intents and purposes present in spirit. His opinion, his judgment, his authority as an apostle of Jesus Christ, were there as effectually as if he himself had been there. His personal presence, then, it may be supposed, would have made no difference in respect to the course to be pursued; for he had judged already, *as though he were present*. The exclusion of the offender must still have been the act of the church. The censure incurred by such an one, must still have been inflicted of many. They themselves must still have put away from among them that wicked person. The apostle, had he been present, would not have done what, being absent, he instructed them to do, *as though he were present*. At least, he would not have done it, absolutely, and without their voice. Doubtless he would have acted conjointly with the church;—indeed, he did so act in spirit;—but with all his power and authority, it can scarcely be supposed

that he would assume the right to excommunicate an offender, independently of the church to which he belonged. Had he possessed that right, his absence would have been no obstacle to its exercise ; for he judged *as though he were present*.

If these views are correct, they may aid us in judging of the excommunication of Hymeneus and Alexander,—“whom,” says the apostle, “I have delivered unto Satan, that they may learn not to blaspheme.” (1 Tim. 1:20.) Did Paul act alone in this matter? No one can say positively that he did not. It is certain that he acted, and that no action on the part of the church is recorded. At the same time, the fact that he forbore to exclude the Corinthian, and distinctly recognized the power of exclusion as residing in the church,—may authorize the belief, that he was not so absolute, so entirely alone, in the case under consideration as some have supposed. The act in question may have been performed by the church under his spiritual oversight, instruction, and guidance ; and he may speak of it as his own, because he directed, and participated in it. There is no certain proof that it was not so, but on the contrary, a strong probability that it was. Indeed, if it were possible to show that the apostle was alone in the transaction, still, it would furnish no precedent for a similar exercise of power by one who is not an apostle.

Nor is the exercise of such power, by any individual, however elevated his station, authorized by the language of Paul to Titus :—“A man that is an heretic, after the first and second admonition, reject.” (Titus

3 : 10.) What does the apostle mean by the first and second admonition? Evidently, certain well known and established points in the process of corrective discipline, by which, if they prove ineffectual, the way is prepared for the expulsion of the offender. The expression has reference, doubtless, to the personal labors of individual church members, enjoined by the great law of discipline in Matt. 18 : 15, 16, as well as to the reproof of the associated body. And if the preliminary steps, in the treatment of a case of heresy, must be in conformity to that law, as the passage under examination plainly implies,—so, also, must the final decision. The whole matter must be laid before the church; and the rejection of the heretic must be the act of the church. It belonged to Titus, unquestionably, as a spiritual overseer, to take the lead. It was his to explain the law of Christ, and to enjoin obedience. But still, the execution of that law, the putting away, the excommunication of the offender, devolved upon the body.

We have thus seen, that the power to maintain the salutary corrective discipline prescribed by the law of Christ, was originally vested in the churches. We have not seen, nor can it be made to appear from the New Testament, which is our only source of information on the subject, that this power was ever committed to any man, or body of men, other than the churches. The conclusion, therefore, is unavoidable, that the churches alone can rightfully exercise it. The charter and basis of their prerogative in this respect, is the law of Christ; and his disciples need no higher

authority for doing whatever he has commanded. Their right to associate themselves together for the observance of his ordinances and worship, and to assume the form and organization of churches, after the New Testament model; the privilege of each church, so constituted, to manage its own affairs, and to discipline its own members, according to its best judgment of what the Lord requires; and the exemption to which each is entitled from foreign interference, supervision or control, either ecclesiastical or civil;—in short, all the powers and privileges of the churches, rest upon this ground. The law of Christ has conferred these powers and privileges, and they may not rightfully be invaded. They belong to the churches; and rightfully, may be neither delegated nor surrendered, neither transferred nor alienated. Every other ecclesiastical tribunal, however constituted,—every other body, claiming and exercising disciplinary powers, from the petty church session to the grand consistory, is guilty of usurpation,—exists and acts, lives, moves, and has its being, in violation of the law of Christ, and of the rights of his people. And every church submitting to such usurpation, and relinquishing its right to be the conservator of its own purity, is recreant to the solemn trust it has received from the Master.\*

3. The Baptist churches, happily, are exempt from the evils which seem to be inseparable from the existence and action of these unscriptural tribunals.

\* Government of the Churches, § 4.

To some extent, however, they may be liable to similar evils, resulting from an erroneous theory and practice in relation to the powers of councils. A council has been thought by some to be a kind of ecclesiastical tribunal, or court of appeal, superior to the churches, and competent to revise their decisions. In accordance with this theory, councils have sometimes assumed, either with or without the consent of the churches at whose call they were convened, those disciplinary powers which, as we have seen, are vested in the churches alone. And churches have sometimes yielded these powers. It has happened, in more than one instance, that a church has referred a matter of difficulty, involving perhaps, the Christian character and standing of one or more of its members, to the judgment of a council, pledging itself beforehand to abide the decision. And it has happened, that a church has submitted an act of exclusion, already passed, to the revision of a council, to be confirmed or reversed, under a similar pledge. Now, it may be demanded, what scriptural warrant has a church to make such a pledge? How can it surrender to another body, that authority which Christ has placed in its own hands, and for the proper exercise of which he holds it responsible? What scriptural warrant has a council to assume that authority? Can the order which the King himself has appointed, be thus changed, without a presumptuous invasion of his high prerogative? Besides, the council is not infallible. It is liable to error; it may be influenced by party feeling, or in some other way improperly swayed; and its decision may be

wrong. That decision may condemn the innocent, and justify the guilty ; but still the church stands pledged beforehand to sustain and enforce it.

The true theory of councils, appears to be that which regards them as merely advisory. In ordinary cases of discipline, involving no doubtful or difficult question, they are not needed. But cases of a different character may arise. A church may be called to act upon questions of the highest importance, and so complicated and difficult, as to render needful all the wisdom and experience that can be brought to bear upon them. Or, a church may be so divided in opinion on questions seriously affecting its vital interests, that no approach to unanimity can reasonably be hoped for, except through the influence of such a council as may command the respect and confidence of the body. Or, the pastor of a church may be guilty of some misconduct, involving a forfeiture of his ministerial and Christian character. In this last case, although no doubt may be entertained in relation to the course to be pursued, still it is important that the advice of other pastors and able brethren should be obtained. The removal of one of Zion's watchmen, is a matter of painful interest, not merely to the one church over which he presides, but to many. As a public teacher of religion, he has had a place in their affectionate regard ; and his fall, like the extinction of a star, is felt by them to be a public calamity. It would seem, therefore, in the case supposed, to be due to the neighboring churches, that before any decisive action is had, a council should be called to deliberate upon the whole

matter, and say what action in their judgment is advisable. The opinion of such a body, although not absolutely binding upon the church, is entitled to its respectful consideration; and if adopted, must add greatly to the weight of its final decision.

In this, and in all cases, where the aid of a council is sought, the right of decision rests with the church. It is the province of the council, not to act authoritatively, but to advise the churches how to act. The advice so given ought by no means to be lightly rejected; but if, in the deliberate judgment of the church, it is contrary to the will of the Master, it cannot be adopted. Where a disagreement of this kind exists, perhaps the most effective means of restoring harmony may be, to have recourse to a second council. Still, the ultimate decision belongs to the church.

It is supposed by some, that the power of ordination to the Christian ministry resides, not in the church, but in a council, assembled at the call of the church, and acting through a presbytery of its own selection. And this being assumed, it is supposed to follow, that the power to depose from the ministry, which is an act of equal authority with the other, must be lodged in a body similarly constituted. But whence, it may be demanded, does the council, as such, derive its origin and its powers? Evidently, from the church. But for the call of the church, it would never have existed. It is the creature of the church, and cannot, without manifest impropriety, exercise an authority superior to that of its creator. Besides,—if a church be incompetent to depose from the ministry, it must also be

incompetent to exclude a minister, since the former act is virtually included in the latter. The discipline of the church, so far as ministers are concerned, would thus become an empty name. The truth seems to be, that the ordinary power is in the church. Inasmuch, however, as the exercise of that power is an act of public importance and interest, it is due to the neighboring churches, that the advice of their pastors and such other members as they may designate for this purpose, should previously be heard. Especially is it due to the presbyters who may be called upon to officiate in that act, that they should have opportunity to satisfy themselves in relation to the character, call to the ministry, and qualifications of the candidate. For these reasons, a council ought always in such cases to be called,—not to ordain, but to advise the church in respect to the expediency of ordination; nor is it easy to conceive of a case in which it would be expedient for the church to insist upon proceeding, contrary to such advice. Still, the right of decision is in the church; and the officiating presbytery should be regarded as acting, not in behalf of the council, but in behalf of the church.

#### § 11. LIMITATIONS OF THE POWER OF DISCIPLINE.

As the law of Christ is the source from which the power of discipline is derived, so it is the measure and rule by which that power is limited. The churches are invested with no absolute authority,—but only

with such an authority as the New Testament, the great charter of Christian rights and privileges, has conferred upon them. They are accountable to the Master; and can have no rightful power to act otherwise than in accordance with his revealed will. To this, as a common rule of action, they are bound to conform.

1. Now it is obvious, or ought to be, that by the law of Christ, the power of discipline vested in the churches, must be limited to the treatment of offences committed by their own members. In giving to each church this power over its own members, he has virtually prohibited the extension of it by any one, over the members of another. The propriety of this restriction may seem too evident to require an illustration,—and yet it is not always observed. For example,—a church receives the complaint of one of its own members against a member of another church, and appoints a committee to investigate the charge, and demand such reparation as may appear to be due. No satisfactory adjustment of the matter is effected; and the question arises, what farther is to be done? It is clear that excommunication is impracticable; for the offender belongs to another body. Shall the case, then, be submitted to that body? This can only be done by letter, or committee,—and might have been done as well, and with far less inconvenience, by the complainant himself, with “one or two more.” (Matt. 18: 16.) Besides,—the church feels, that thus to solicit judgment at the hands of a sister church, in a case which it has itself assumed to try, would involve

a compromise of its own dignity ;—while, on the other hand, a *demand* of such judgment, might justly be regarded by that sister church, as an invasion of her rights. In a matter so complicated,—so difficult, so perplexing,—it is resolved that the wise men and fathers of the churches shall be called together in solemn council. And what will the council do ? Why, if it be truly wise, it will advise, first, that all the proceedings of the church in the case, be as if they had never been ;—secondly, that the aggrieved party go to him that has caused the grief, and “ tell him his fault;” if he will not hear, that he “ take with him one or two more;” and if he neglect to hear them, that he “ tell it to the church” to which the offender belongs, and which alone has jurisdiction in the case.

2. Another obvious limitation of the power of discipline, has respect to the question, What constitutes an offence ? The churches have no right to legislate in this matter, or to treat as an offence, that which the law of Christ has not made such. Yet this is sometimes done. It was done, even in the apostolic age. “ I wrote unto the church; but Diotrephes, who loveth to have the pre-eminence among them, receiveth us not. Wherefore, if I come, I will remember his deeds which he doeth, prating against us with malicious words ;—and not content therewith, neither doth he himself receive the brethren, and forbidde them that would, and *casteth them out of the church.*” (3 John 9, 10.) A similar ambitious, malicious, and revengeful spirit, has been known in more modern times to produce similar results. A Diotrephes arises, as

piring to the pre-eminence in the church to which he belongs, becomes the leader of a party, and succeeds by intrigue and management in controlling the body. He finds in his way, however, a Demetrius,—one who “hath good report of all men, and of the truth itself,” (ver. 12,) and through whose influence, as a discerning, judicious, and faithful brother, his plans are sometimes defeated. His anger is kindled against the man who, like Mordecai, neither bows, nor does him reverence; he “prates against him with malicious words,” and awakens the jealousy of the brethren by imputing to him a desire to bear the rule among them, the very fault of which he is himself guilty. Some important decision is swayed by that jealousy, and insisted upon, simply because it is contrary to the known opinions of him who is the unconscious object of suspicion. The act is so obviously wrong, that he feels himself constrained to dissent from, and protest against it. The occasion is eagerly seized by his enemies; a charge of contumacy is preferred against him; the forms of discipline are hurried through with indecent haste; and the good Demetrius is “cast out of the church.” Now, this is tyranny,—sheer spiritual tyranny. It is worse. It is a perpetration of flagitious wrong, under the sacrilegious pretence of guarding the purity of the church. Christ never gave to his churches the power of excommunication, to be thus perverted, and made subservient to the gratification of their own evil passions. If they abuse it to this end,—if, while they profess to administer his discipline, they despise the weakest, or trample upon the

rights of the least of his disciples,—the Lord is the avenger of all such, and will surely judge and punish their oppressors.

3. The power of discipline vested in the churches, is farther limited, as it respects the force of their decisions. These, whether of excommunication or absolution, can neither bind nor loose, in an absolute sense. Whether just or unjust, they cannot change the character or spiritual state of the persons to whom they have reference. They merely express the opinions of the churches, in regard to the title of such persons to church membership. The declaration of our Lord in Matt. 18 : 18, "Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven,"—was addressed, not to the churches, but to the apostles. It stamps with divine authority the instructions which, as inspired teachers, the apostles have left on record; but it can be true of the disciplinary action of the churches, only so far as that action is in conformity with those instructions.\* If the decisions of a church

\* "Our Lord spoke to the apostles, and to all of them. The absolute authority given them was inseparably connected with their immediate inspiration; and all their successors, pretended or real, from the conclave at Rome to an independent church-meeting, are concerned in the promise, just so far as their decisions, whether they bind or loose, accord to the doctrines, precepts, and rules, transmitted to us from the apostles,—and no farther. Authority to the extent of the words used by our Lord, many have claimed; but God never gave it to any, except *his inspired apostles*: and in this view, the promise is our Lord's full attestation to all the writings which, by them, and under their inspection, were given to the church and to posterity, as the infallible oracles of God." Dr. Scott.

be just, unquestionably they are approved in heaven ; but it is possible, as we have seen, that they may be unjust. Churches may be improperly swayed in their decisions ; they may act under the influence of corrupt motives ; or, with the purest motives, and best intentions, they are liable to mistake. Their decisions may be wrong ; and if so, it is obvious that heaven will not approve them.

It seems to follow, that there is a limit to the respect due from one church to the disciplinary acts of another. As a general rule, doubtless, the churches are bound to repose confidence in each other's integrity,—and not, without good and sufficient reasons to call in question the uprightness of each other's decisions. The passing of an act of excommunication by one church, should doubtless, when nothing appears to the contrary, be regarded by its sister churches as evidence of a forfeiture of Christian character on the part of the person excommunicated ; and in their conduct towards him, they should govern themselves accordingly. He should no longer be admitted to affectionate and familiar intercourse, as a brother approved ; but in seeking such intercourse, should be made to feel that the members of other churches, as well as of his own, look upon him sorrowfully, as a brother fallen,—as one who, by his unworthiness, has inflicted a wound and a dishonor upon the precious cause which they love. A contrary course, it is evident, must be destructive of the ends of corrective church discipline, and tend seriously to interrupt the fellowship and mutual good feeling which ought ever to subsist between sister

churches. But there are exceptions to this general rule. There is a limit to the obligation of one church, to respect the disciplinary action of another. If such action is known to be wrong,—if, for example, a church is known to have passed a sentence of excommunication upon one of its members unrighteously,—no other church is bound to respect that decision. No other church is even at liberty to respect that decision, knowing it to be wrong; since, to do so, would be to give its sanction to the triumph of church power and church prerogative over right.

If any are disposed to question the correctness of this position, let them ask themselves whether John, in his treatment of the persons who, through the influence of Diotrephes, were “cast out of the church,” not for any fault, but merely for the exercise of Christian hospitality,—was bound to have respect to that act of high-handed oppression. Had these persons presented themselves to a church of which John was the acting pastor, praying for admission to its fellowship, on the ground that their excommunication from the other church was without any just cause,—is it probable that their prayer would have been denied? Would the apostle have felt himself under obligation to advise their rejection from a privilege which they were known to have never forfeited, simply because another church had unreasonably and wickedly so rejected them? No one will undertake to sustain an affirmative reply to these questions. The truth is, the disciplinary acts of a church are entitled to the respect of its sister churches, just so far as those acts are, or

may reasonably be supposed to be, right,—and no farther.

The writer would by no means be understood, in the foregoing remarks, to advocate the hasty reception, by one church, of persons excluded from another. On the contrary, he believes that such reception ought never to take place, without a full investigation of the facts in the case, and satisfactory proof, either that the act of exclusion was wrong,—or, if right, that the offender has evinced his penitence, by confession, and such reparation as might reasonably be demanded. Nor even then, does he think the excluded person should be so received, until suitable efforts on his part to be restored to the church from which he was cast out, have been found unavailing. The point insisted upon, is, that prerogative should not be sustained at the expense of right,—that when a sentence of excommunication is known to be unrighteous, and is obstinately persisted in, the excommunicated person should not be compelled to lie under that bond forever,—that Christ has never invested any church with a power so tremendous, that under the influence of some ambitious and vindictive Diotrephes, it may plant its foot upon the neck of a faithful Demetrius, and keep it there,—in a word, that if a brother be cast out of a church for no wrong, or kept out after he has made full reparation of his wrong, another church may rightfully receive him. It would seem, however, to be the part of wisdom in that other church, before acting decisively in the case, to propose to the body from which the brother was excluded, a reference of the whole matter to a mutual coun-

cil ; and if the proposal be rejected, to call a council on its own responsibility. In no case of the kind, it is believed, would it be either prudent, or right, for a church to proceed without such council. The imputation of rashness would thus be avoided, and the advice of judicious brethren of other churches would give weight to its ultimate decision.

4. A further limitation of the power of corrective discipline, has respect to the manner of its exercise. This, as will be more fully shown in another part of the present inquiry, is definitely prescribed, and every step in the process, from beginning to end, clearly pointed out by the great Head of the church, who cannot err. His explicit directions may not innocently be disregarded. If the churches presume to substitute other modes of discipline for that which he has appointed, they transcend their rightful powers. They impeach his wisdom. They cast contempt upon his authority. They practically deny him the right of supremacy in his own kingdom, and practically claim that supremacy for themselves. His law is the rule of discipline, and that rule is imperative. In all their disciplinary acts, therefore, they should have an eye to his instructions, and carefully adhere to them. So long as they act in accordance with his revealed will, and no longer, may they confidently hope for his approbation and sanction.

**§ 12. OBLIGATION OF THE CHURCHES TO  
MAINTAIN CORRECTIVE DISCIPLINE.**

It cannot be doubted that He who "loved the church; and gave himself for it, that he might sanctify and cleanse it," still feels a deep interest in its purity. Accordingly, he has not only invested each particular branch of that church with such disciplinary powers as are needful, to purge itself from corruption; but has laid each under the most solemn obligation, when the occasion requires it, to exercise these powers. While he demands that every one who names his sacred name should depart from iniquity,—it is equally his will, that his people, in their associated capacity, should aim, by such means as he himself has appointed, to secure a compliance with that demand. He requires that they should watch over each other in love; that offenders should be kindly, yet faithfully admonished; and that such as obstinately persist in flagrant sin, should be rejected from the fellowship of the churches.

A practical acknowledgment of the authority of Christ in respect to these matters, on the part of his churches,—or, in other words, a diligent observance of whatever pertains to the salutary corrective discipline which he has been pleased to ordain,—is essential to their own best interests, as well as to their useful efficiency in the promotion of his cause. If they disregard his command,—if, instead of reprobating, they have fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness which are perpetrated in their midst,—if

they spare the sin for the sake of the sinner, and so tacitly connive at wrongs against which their solemn and united testimony should be recorded,—they must subject themselves, in so doing, to his terrific frown. He whose eyes are as a flame of fire, is represented as walking in the midst of the golden candlesticks, closely observant of the evil, as well as of the good. He knows the works of all his churches; and while he assures such as “cannot bear them that are evil,” of his gracious regard and protection, he declares his determination, on the other hand, to fight against such as tolerate iniquity, with the sword of his mouth.

It is impossible that a church in which corrective discipline is neglected, should be a prosperous church. Aside from the forfeiture of the divine favor, which is incurred by such neglect, and which must prove fatal to all true prosperity,—the allowance of sin, uncensured, in church members, has a direct natural tendency to disastrous results. A pernicious and rapidly corrupting example is thereby introduced into the body. If one member may transgress, unquestioned and uncondemned, so may another, and another; and the evil will extend itself, until the entire church is pervaded. “A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump.” A little root of bitterness, if it be suffered to grow and spread, will defile many. A slight gangrenous affection, if its progress be not stayed, will speedily pass through the whole body, prostrating its energies, and turning its comeliness into corruption. In like manner, offences committed by church members,

if tolerated, "will increase unto more ungodliness." (1 Cor. 5:6; Heb. 12:15; 2 Tim. 2:16, 17.)

Farther,—the neglect of corrective discipline, where there is manifest occasion for its exercise, will be likely to exert a repulsive rather than an attractive influence upon persons of genuine piety, to whom the church should ever be an inviting home. These may well decline to associate themselves with such as profess that they know God, but in works deny him. They may well shrink back, with feelings of strong repugnance, from all connexion with a body which is evidently full of disorder, and festering in its own corruption ; and seek a place in a purer church, where they may hope to profit by the faithful admonitions and holy examples of their brethren. If a church in which the legitimate consequences of this neglect are in any considerable degree apparent, presents any attraction, it must be to persons of a different character. It may, indeed, be attractive to men who wish only to assume a form of godliness. It may become a favorite lurking place of designing hypocrites, who choose to cloak their unholy practices under a religious profession ; but there is little reason to expect its enlargement by the accession of truly pious and valuable members.

The existence in churches of palpable wrongs, uncorrected and unreproved, must be destructive, also, in a great measure, of their usefulness. It must divest them, at least in part, of that salutary moral power which the Saviour intended they should wield over the unconverted around them,—but which must always be

proportioned to their purity. He calls his people "the salt of the earth," and "the light of the world." It was his will, that by their conservative and purifying influence, they should counteract the moral corruption which every where prevails ; that by their instructive testimony and example, they should reclaim from the error of their ways the children of darkness ; that in their visible organization they should stand forth, a conspicuous object,—"the pillar and ground of the truth,"—"a city set upon a hill that could not be hid," a living illustration, in the view of all men, of the pure and holy principles of the gospel. (Matt. 5:13—16; 1 Tim. 3:15.) The world is looking to them for an exemplification of the power of those principles, and judging of the efficacy or inefficacy of Christianity itself, by what is seen in its professed votaries and advocates. And is it not obvious, that the toleration of any flagrant misconduct in church members, must have an unfavorable effect upon that judgment? Pledged as they are, by their profession, to seek the reformation of others,—if they themselves are found to be corrupt, and especially, if the churches to which they belong permit their wrongs to pass uncensured,—will not such a state of things tend to prejudice the minds of the unconverted against the truth? Will it not confirm them in error, and strengthen them in sin?

To such inquiries, no intelligent and discerning Christian can be at a loss how to reply. Indeed, our Lord himself has supplied an answer. He foresaw the mighty influence, for good or for evil, which his professed disciples were destined to exert upon the

world; and predicted the deplorable consequences to the world, of a perversion of that influence. He knew that offences, committed by such as bear the Christian name, would become occasions of stumbling; that the wicked would thus be led to harden themselves in impiety; and that the danger of their final perdition would thus be fearfully augmented. It was in view of these pernicious effects of divisions, contentions, and scandalous violations of Christian principle among his people, that he exclaimed, "Woe unto the world because of offences! Woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!" And it was to provide for the prompt removal of the causes from which such effects might be apprehended, that the great law of corrective discipline was subsequently given. (Matt. 18: 8, 15—17.)

Instances in which the above named evils have resulted from a neglect of that law, are by no means rare. One such instance may be briefly stated.

A—— B——, a man of large property, and possessing much of that kind of consideration and influence which property secures, became connected, during a season of revival, with the church in C——. Others were baptized about the same time; but they were persons of little note in the world; and it was a common remark among that portion of the members upon whom the pecuniary burdens of the church had chiefly rested, that the addition of one such man as Judge B——, was in reality worth more to the body, than that of all the rest. He was accordingly treated with great deference, and almost immediately found

himself able to control the action of the church. It soon appeared, however, that the love of gain, which had been the grand fault of his character before his conversion, remained unsubdued ; and that he was still accustomed, as he had been in former years, to over-reach and defraud the unwary, whenever he could do so without exposing himself to the civil law. For a while, the brethren, unwilling to provoke his hostility, and perhaps equally unwilling to deprive themselves of his aid in sustaining the expenses of the church,—winked at his delinquencies. But at length, one of them who had himself suffered wrong at his hands, had the boldness to commence a course of disciplinary labor, and ultimately to lay his complaint before the church. It was obvious, from a reluctant and partial investigation of the case, that a fraud had been perpetrated, but so artfully as to involve no violation of the statute ; and a majority of the members present, availing themselves of this latter circumstance, and judging according to Cæsar's law instead of Christ's, decided that no reparation was due, and that no censure was demanded. The pastor and a few others protested against both the decision and the principle upon which it was based. Those, on the other hand, who had committed themselves in favor of that principle, determined not to recede from it. Parties were formed, and strove together,—but that of the judge was in the ascendant ; the pastor was dismissed ; and most of his adherents were excommunicated. In the mean time, the church had become literally a by-word, and a hissing. Infidels and wicked men sneered at the

morality which, as they said, tolerated any iniquity not punishable by law. The more conscientious members of the church gradually withdrew themselves from its communion, and members of other churches, coming to reside in the neighborhood, refused to connect themselves with a body which had made itself infamous, and which was evidently withering under the frown of God. These, in view of the moral desolations around them, at length conceived it to be their duty to unite together in the organization of a new church. Providence smiled upon and prospered the effort; and the old organization, after languishing a few years longer, became extinct.

Now, if the law of corrective discipline were less explicit than it is, or even if it had never been given,—still, the fact that such consequences naturally result from the neglect of that discipline, would impose upon the churches an obligation to maintain it. They could not innocently pursue a policy, which, in the very nature of things, must prove fatal, both to their own spiritual prosperity, and to the salutary moral influence which they are bound to exert upon the world. But we have a higher ground of obligation,—the law of Christ. The duty of the churches to be vigilant in guarding against corruption, and prompt in seeking its removal where it exists, is enjoined by the positive enactment of him who has “all power in heaven and in earth.” He has prescribed the reformatory measures to be employed, and pointed out the alternative to be resorted to, if these measures prove unavailing. The expression of his will, as we

have seen, is imperative. And if his chuches disregard the obligations thus laid upon them,—if his associated disciples permit offences to exist among them, unnoticed and unrebuked, and so become partakers of other men's sins,—they must expect to share also in the woe which he has denounced upon the man by whom the offence cometh.

### § 13. OBJECTS OF CORRECTIVE DISCIPLINE.

It seems essential to the proper discharge of the duties pertaining to corrective church discipline, that the great objects for which it was designed should be kept distinctly in view, and exclusively sought. The intentions of all who bear any part in the execution of the law of discipline, should correspond with the intentions of Him who enacted it. They should aim at the accomplishment of the very purposes which the law contemplates, and of no others. If they have recourse to disciplinary action, as a means of securing the success of their own plans, the elevation of their own party, or the gratification of their own passions,—however strictly that action may be conformed to the letter of the law, it is not obedience, and cannot receive the approbation of the Lawgiver. If their pretended zeal for the Lord, like that of Jehu, be in fact only a zeal for themselves,—they are offenders in his sight, no less than those against whom that zeal is directed. (2 Kings 10 : 16, 31.)

1. From what has been said of the obligation of the

churches to maintain corrective discipline, it is sufficiently clear, that one important end of its appointment is to preserve the purity of the churches, or to restore it when lost, and to prevent those evils which naturally result from their corruption. The disastrous consequences to be apprehended from the toleration of flagrant wrongs in a church, have already been noticed, and need not be again described. Every church member should bear in mind, that the real prosperity of the body to which he belongs, as well as its usefulness, must depend upon the fidelity with which its purity is guarded, and be ready, whenever any offence may arise, to perform his part in such disciplinary acts as the church may deem necessary, to "approve itself to be clear in the matter." (2 Cor. 7 : 11.)

2. Another object, is to vindicate the honor of God, and of the churches,—either in the recovery of offenders, or, if they prove incorrigible, in their expulsion from the ranks of the faithful. The man who, in taking upon him the Christian name, has solemnly pledged himself to live in accordance with the holy principles of the gospel, and who yet deliberately and intentionally violates those principles,—is guilty of casting dishonor upon God. He gives occasion to the enemies of God, to blaspheme his name and doctrine, and to speak evil of the way of truth. (Rom. 2 : 23, 24 ; 1 Tim. 6 : 1 ; 2 Peter 2 : 2.) Nor can the church in which such an offender is found, allow his iniquity to pass uncensured, without becoming justly liable to the charge of a participation in his guilt. If the partiality of personal friends, or the influence of

family connexions, or any thing else be suffered to shield him from deserved rebuke,—the church which has thus failed to discharge its high responsibilities, will no longer be able to shield itself from the contempt of the world. To prevent, or to remove all occasion of reproach and blasphemy on the part of them that are without, is one important purpose of corrective church discipline. And that purpose, by the faithful use of corrective measures, is equally attained, whether the offender be, or be not reclaimed. Let it be seen, in every case of flagrant wrong committed by a church member, that his brethren regard that wrong as they ought, with decided disapprobation,—let them practically bear testimony against it, by doing promptly whatever the law of discipline requires to be done,—and no reproachful imputation can lie upon them. If the wrong doer be recovered and saved, the happy effect of Christian fidelity is thus exemplified ; and if it be necessary to cast him off, still the honor of God, of his cause, and of his people, is preserved.

3. Farther,—the whole process of corrective discipline, from first to last, is evidently designed to effect the reformation of the offender. The first thing enjoined, is to “go and tell him his fault;” or, as the original word *ἀλεγχοντα* seems to imply, by reasoning the case with him, to convince him of his wrong, that he may forsake it. This is the end to be sought in the individual labor prescribed ; and accordingly, if the effort succeed, nothing further is requisite. “If he hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother.” But if the repeated admonitions of individual brethren, and the

voice of the church itself, be unheeded, so that his separation from the body becomes necessary,—still, the object of this ultimate and decisive act is the same. It is to be regarded, not as a penal, but as a reformatory measure,—as a merciful, (and it should be hoped, a temporary) privation of the rights and privileges of church membership, by which the offender may be made sensible of his wrong. (Matt. 18 : 15—7, comp. 2 Thess. 3 : 6—15.) “Observe, he doth not say, ‘Let him be to thee as a devil, or damned spirit, as one whose case is desperate ;’ but ‘as a heathen and a publican, as one in a capacity of being restored, and received in again. Count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.’”\* In perfect harmony with this view, the object for which the Corinthian offender was to be delivered unto Satan, was the destruction of the flesh,—that is, the mortification of the sinful appetites and passions,—that the spirit might be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus ; and upon his subsequent repentance, his brethren were instructed to restore and confirm their love to him. (1 Cor. 5 : 5 ; 2 Cor. 2 : 7, 8.)

These, then, in brief, are the true ends of corrective church discipline ; and it becomes all who undertake so important a work, as they would approve themselves to the Master, carefully to keep these ends in view.

To illustrate, let it be supposed that in a certain church there are two brethren, possessed of many excellent qualities, and deservedly held in high estima-

\* Matthew Henry.

tion, but unhappily cherishing a secret wish to be the greatest. Neither of them, it may be, is distinctly conscious of aspiring to the pre-eminence, like Diotrephes; yet each is ambitious of a measure of influence which only one can enjoy; and each beholds in the other an obstacle to the attainment of his purpose. A rivalry springs up between them, which gradually ripens into a mutual dislike. At this juncture, one of the two brethren is overtaken in a fault,—not merely a slight indiscretion, but a glaring impropriety, involving a trespass against the other, and making it the duty of the latter to enter upon a process of disciplinary labor. Highly exasperated, and yet secretly pleased with the hope of removing so formidable an adversary, he resolves, bitterly and vindictively, to do all that may rightfully be done to procure his expulsion. In proceeding, he is careful to adhere to the letter of the law; but what is the object he has in view? To be revenged upon an enemy,—to punish a transgressor,—to cast out of the church, and deliver unto Satan, one who stands in his way.

It must be obvious that these are not the legitimate ends of corrective church discipline. That discipline was not designed for the gratification of personal resentment, or private revenge. “Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves;—for it is written, vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.” (Rom. 12:19.) Its object is not the infliction of deserved punishment. As we have seen, it is not penal, but corrective. It seeks the reformation of the offender; and failing in this, leaves him to the righteous judgment of God,

who has reserved in his own hands, (at least in such cases,) the right to punish. Should the language of Paul, in 2 Cor. 2:6, "Sufficient to such a man is this *punishment*, which was inflicted of many," be thought to authorize a different opinion,—it may be replied that *spirituā* should have been rendered *rebuke*, or *censure*, as in the margin. That rebuke, though the highest which the church could administer, was not of a punitive character, but designed for the offender's good,—"that his spirit might be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus." (1 Cor. 5:5.) Nor was it intended that the discipline of the churches should be used as an instrument to promote the ambitious schemes of any individual, or the selfish purposes of any party. "With respect to its object, it must carefully be observed, that it is not to pander to human domination, or to subserve the political interests of any party; to coerce the judgment or conscience of men; or to avenge any public or private injury; but it is designed to effect the observance of those means by which the holiness, comfort, and usefulness of Christians may be preserved and improved; to exhibit the influence of the Christian religion in producing all that is excellent, amiable, and beneficial; to secure the fulfilment of all the relative obligations of church union; to attract into such union, persons whose minds and characters are governed by evangelical truth and undissembled piety; and to remove from the visible ranks of the faithful, such as prove themselves to be unworthy of a place among the followers of Christ."<sup>\*</sup>

But, to return to the case of the two brethren :— Let it be supposed that, when the offence is committed, the aggrieved party, instead of brooding over and magnifying the injury which he himself has suffered, is deeply grieved in view of the dishonor that has been cast upon God, and his cause, and deeply impressed with the necessity of vindicating that cause from repreach. His affliction is heightened by the reflection, that, possibly, something wrong in his own deportment or conduct has been the occasion of his brother's fall. He retires to his closet, and humbles himself before his Maker ; weeps over that unhallowed ambition by which he has caused one to offend for whom he has reason to believe Christ died ; and resolves to do whatever may be done, consistently with a regard to righteousness, to “ restore such an one in the spirit of meekness.” (Gal. 6 : 1.) He goes to the offender and tells him his fault,—but first confesses his own ; he strives, by every means in his power, to reclaim him from his wrong ; and if it be necessary at last to reject him from the fellowship of the church, he participates in the act with a sorrowful heart, and only because fidelity to God demands it.

The different ends now sought, give to the whole transaction a widely different character and aspect. And that these are the true ends, is too clear to be questioned for a moment. We feel, instinctively, that he has done right. The course he has pursued commends itself at once to our approbation ; and we hesitate not to say, that in what he has done to maintain the salutary discipline of the church, he has aimed at,

and effected, the very objects for which that discipline was designed.

#### § 14. SPIRIT IN WHICH CORRECTIVE DISCIPLINE SHOULD BE CONDUCTED.

The view taken above of the nature and objects of corrective church discipline, may seem, perhaps, to indicate with sufficient clearness the spirit in which it should be conducted. A few additional suggestions, however, in relation to a point of such importance, will not be deemed out of place.

1. And, first, it may be observed, that a negligent, and dilatory spirit, in cases demanding disciplinary action, ought carefully to be avoided. Such action, whenever it is found to be necessary, should be promptly commenced, and prosecuted with as much diligence and dispatch as the nature of the case, and a suitable regard to all the ends of corrective discipline, will admit. A delay to do what the law of Christ requires to be done, when an offence has been committed, must inevitably produce, to some extent, the same evils which would follow if it were left entirely undone.

For example,—a church member is so regardless of his word, so habitually inattentive to the fulfilment of his promises, and so accustomed to make exaggerated, and even utterly unfounded statements, that those who know him best have ceased to rely upon him as a man of truth. Many of his brethren are acquainted with his habits; but no one is disposed to move in a matter in which all are equally concerned; and he passes on,

unquestioned and unrebuked. Nor is the church at length aroused, until it finds itself lying under the reproach of harboring and holding in its communion a common liar. A committee is then appointed to visit and admonish the delinquent; but still, through the remissness of the brethren selected, that duty is not performed. Several church meetings pass before a report is received; and the final disposition of the case is deferred from time to time, until months, and it may be years, have gone by.

Now it is clear that the objects of corrective discipline cannot thus be attained. That discipline, in order to be effective, must be prompt. If disorders exist, the appointed remedies must speedily be applied. If improperly delayed,—if disciplinary action be neglected until the odium of such neglect can no longer be borne, and at last only reluctantly and partially performed,—it needs little sagacity to perceive that the prosperity of the church in which this state of things is found, is at an end, until another spirit shall prevail in its counsels. (1 Cor. 5:2; Rev. 2:14—16, 20).

2. In seeking to avoid this evil, however, the opposite extreme should also be avoided, and with equal care. The indulgence of a rash, impetuous, hasty spirit, in the performance of disciplinary action, is in all respects unfavorable to a happy result. Such action should be cool and deliberate. There should be a patient investigation of every case of alleged wrong, a careful weighing of evidence, and a dispassionate consideration of such circumstances as may seem either to extenuate the offence, or to place it in an aggravated

light. Otherwise, a righteous decision is scarcely to be expected; and an intelligent one is impossible. Churches are sometimes unduly sensitive to the dis-honor which they suppose is resting upon them in consequence of alleged misconduct in their members, and so impatient to wipe off the reproach by a speedy act of exclusion, that they scarcely wait to inquire whether that high censure has been deserved. They cannot brook the delay inseparable from a thorough investigation; they pause not to ascertain the nature and extent of the moral disease with which a member is thought to be infected, with a view, if possible, to avoid the last dreadful extremity; but hasten to apply the amputating knife, lest it should be too late. These things ought not to be. The disciples of Christ should have so much confidence in the wisdom of the corrective measures by him appointed, as not to dream of substituting a more summary process. They should execute these measures fully; and at the same time calmly, collectedly, and without any anxious forebodings as to the result. While they are careful not to incur the imputation of tardiness, in neglecting to commence any disciplinary movement that may seem necessary,—they should be equally upon their guard against precipitancy, in pushing that movement to a hurried and premature conclusion. Nothing which the law of Christ enjoins, should be omitted; and all should be done in an orderly and becoming manner. The time thus occupied, is not lost; nor need it be apprehended that the honor of the churches or of the cause will suffer from the delay thus occasioned.

3. Farther,—Every disciplinary movement should be characterized by a spirit of faithfulness. No respect of persons is allowable,—no partiality,—no indulgence of wrongs in the affluent or influential, which in persons of humbler station would be regarded as deserving of censure. Whatever differences in respect to external condition, or earthly elevation, may exist among the professed disciples of Christ,—they occupy, in respect to religious and moral obligation, a common level. They are bound by a common rule; and no departure from that rule, demanding disciplinary action, should, through sympathy with the offender, an unhallowed deference to his high standing, or a cowardly fear of provoking his hostility, be suffered to pass without rebuke. Nor should that rebuke be disarmed of its power, by any attempt on the part of those who administer it to palliate the wrong against which it is directed; or by any ill-timed and injudicious show of tenderness towards the wrong-doer, as if he were more unfortunate than guilty,—“more sinned against than sinning.” Individuals and churches, in the treatment of offences, should remember that they are acting for God, and are not at liberty in the least to compromise his claims; that the law of Christ is imperative, and that they may not shrink from the discharge of any duty which he has enjoined, however painful; that the welfare of the church, its purity, harmony, and efficiency, and even the best interests of the offender himself, are intimately connected with the course they may pursue, and will be most

effectually promoted by their fidelity. (James 2:1—9; 2 Cor. 13:1, 2.)

4. Still farther,—Every step in the process of corrective discipline, from first to last, should be characterized by a spirit of kindness. Individual church members, in admonishing their brethren who have fallen into sin,—and churches, in dealing with offenders who have been found irreclaimable by private admonition,—should beware that they indulge in no resentful or vindictive feeling, and that they exhibit nothing like harshness or severity of manner. While they are faithful to execute the law of Christ, they should do so in a spirit of benevolence and commiseration; of gentleness, patience, and forbearance; in sorrow rather than in anger; seeking the good of him who has been overtaken in a fault, and aiming, if possible, to effect his restoration. Let it be remembered, that one great object of corrective discipline is the recovery of the offender, and not his punishment,—his edification, and not his destruction,—and it will be obvious that those who conduct it should put away from them all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamor, and evil speaking, with all malice. (Eph. 4:31.) Every spirit begets its like; and it is clear that the malignant and hateful dispositions above named, instead of exerting upon a fallen brother a softening and subduing influence, must tend to exasperate and harden. It is love alone that will effectually conquer. Whoever, therefore, would be successful in such reformatory efforts as he may think it his duty to put forth, must see to it that those efforts are dictated by love.

If he would reclaim them that are out of the way, he must have compassion upon them. He must be pitiful, courteous,—not rendering evil for evil, or railing for railing. (1 Pet. 3:8, 9.) He must canvass their acts without prejudice, and candidly give them the most favorable construction they will bear. He must put on that fervent charity which hopeth all things, and thinketh no evil, farther than as it actually appears. (1 Cor. 13:4—7.) He must not be overcome of evil, but seek to overcome evil with good. (Rom. 12:21.) And finally, he must do all under the influence of an humbling consciousness that he is himself liable to be tempted, and that nothing but grace can keep him from falling. (Gal. 6:1.)

It needs no argument or illustration, to show that the spirit here commended is the true spirit in which corrective discipline should be conducted,—that kindness and faithfulness should alike be maintained, and that tardiness and precipitancy should alike be avoided. And yet, a widely different spirit is often found in the churches. Such violations of Christian principle as involve no outrage upon the moral sense even of worldly men,—covetousness, for example, or habitual negligence of the special duties of religion,—are suffered to pass unnoticed, or treated with unjustifiable levity; while drunkenness, a departure from the law of chastity, and other similar offences, which the world itself condemns, in many instances are hastily disposed of, and with little attention to the forms of discipline. In cases of personal injury, there is frequently a failure on the part of the aggrieved broth-

er to exhibit all the kindness and gentleness which the gospel requires.. He allows himself to be excited and angry ; and instead of mildly expostulating with the aggressor, gives vent to his passion in wrathful and reproachful words. Of course the offender is not reclaimed,—for the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God. (James 1 : 20.) But suppose the aggrieved party is of a more noble and generous spirit. The danger in this case, is, that he may be unfaithful. He feels no resentment ; he is ready to forgive ; indeed, he has already forgiven ;—and it would not be strange, if he were reluctant to assume an attitude which must inevitably give pain to the offender, and which may perhaps subject himself to the charge of censoriousness. Still, the fact that he holds no quarrel against his erring brother, cannot release him from the obligation to go and tell that brother his fault, and endeavor to gain from him such proofs of penitence, as may restore between them the fellowship which had begun to be marred. A silent withdrawal of his confidence from him who has done the wrong, without an effort to reclaim him, is consistent neither with kindness nor with fidelity. While it leaves the offender in his sin, it will involve his own soul in guilt, and introduce into the body a source of perpetual disunion. He is not even at liberty to accept, as satisfactory, any offer of reparation which evidently falls short of what the law of Christ requires ; but must insist, with uncompromising faithfulness, that the demands of that law be fully met.

The following extract from Andrew Fuller's circu-

lar letter on the discipline of the primitive churches, exhibits in his peculiarly happy style, the true spirit by which every disciplinary movement should be directed :

" If these ends, (the good of the party, and the honor of God,) be kept in view, they will preserve us from much error ; particularly, from the two great evils into which churches are in danger of falling,—false lenity, and unchristian severity. There is often a party found in a community, who, under the name of tenderness, are for neglecting all wholesome discipline ; or if this cannot be accomplished, for delaying it to the utmost. Such persons are commonly the advocates for disorderly walkers, especially if they be their particular friends or relations. Their language is, ' He that is without sin, let him cast the first stone. My brother has fallen to-day, and I may fall tomorrow.' This spirit, though it exist only in individuals, provided they be persons of any weight or influence, is frequently known to impede the due execution of the laws of Christ ; and if it pervade the community, it will soon reduce it to the lowest state of degeneracy. Such for a time was the spirit of the Corinthians ; but when brought to a proper sense of things, what carefulness it wrought in them, yea, what clearing of themselves, yea, what indignation, yea, what fear, yea, what vehement desire, yea, what zeal, yea, what revenge. In opposing the extreme of false tenderneess, others are in danger of falling into unfeeling severity. This spirit will make the worst of every thing, and lead men to convert the censures of the church into weapons

of private revenge. Persons of this description know not of what manner of spirit they are. They lose sight of the good of the offender. It is not love that operates in them; for love worketh no evil. The true medium between these extremes is a union of mercy and truth. Genuine mercy is combined with faithfulness, and genuine faithfulness with mercy; and this is the only spirit that is likely to purge iniquity. (Prov. 16:6.) Connivance will produce indifference; and undue severity will arm the offender with prejudice, and harden him in sin; but the love of God and of our brother's soul is adapted to answer every good end. If we love God,—like Levi, we shall know no man after the flesh, nor acknowledge our nearest kindred; but shall observe his word, and keep his covenant. And if we love the soul of our brother, we shall say, 'He is fallen to-day, and I will reprove him for his good: I may fall to-morrow, and then let him deal the same with me.' Love is the grand secret of church discipline, and will do more than all other things put together, towards insuring success."\*\*

#### § 15. THE LAW OF CORRECTIVE DISCIPLINE.

The way is now prepared, to enter upon a more direct and particular examination of the law of corrective discipline. It will be found that the treatment of

offences prescribed by that law, is of the simplest, and yet of the most effective kind. It involves no spiritual domination. It imposes no restraints upon the judgment or conscience. It inflicts neither pains nor penalties. It admits of no personal revenge. It consists, first, in a kind and faithful effort to reclaim offenders; and secondly, in a withdrawal from such as refuse to be reclaimed. The first step in the process, is obligatory upon every Christian who is apprised of flagrant wrong in his brother; the second, upon every church, or congregation of baptized believers, among whom an incorrigible offender is found. Beyond this, our Lord has delegated no authority to his churches, and he allows them to submit to none. Beyond this, they have neither legislative nor judicial power,—but are bound simply to obey his enactments, and to abide by his decisions.

The truth of these positions, already shown in part, will be still more obvious from an investigation of the law itself. Different portions of that law are scattered through the New Testament writings; but the largest and fullest statement of it, including the spirit of whatever is said elsewhere, is found in Matt. 18: 15—17.

“ **MOREOVER, IF THY BROTHER SHALL TRESPASS AGAINST THEE, GO AND TELL HIM HIS FAULT BETWEEN THEE AND HIM ALONE: IF HE SHALL HEAR THEE, THOU HAST GAINED THY BROTHER. BUT IF HE WILL NOT HEAR THEE, THEN TAKE WITH THEE ONE OR TWO MORE, THAT IN THE MOUTH OF TWO OR THREE WITNESSES EVERY WORD MAY BE ESTAB-**

LISHED. AND IF HE SHALL NEGLECT TO HEAR THEM, TELL IT UNTO THE CHURCH : BUT IF HE NEGLECT TO HEAR THE CHURCH, LET HIM BE UNTO THEE AS AN HEATHEN MAN AND A PUBLICAN."

1. The first thing observable here, is, that church members, and none else, are properly subject to corrective church discipline. The offender, in the case supposed, is a *brother*, or fellow disciple. It may be, and unquestionably is, in frequent instances, the duty of Christians to administer reproof to them that are without. Where such reproof is evidently needed, and where there is reason to hope that it will be candidly received, it should not be withheld. "Thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbor, and not suffer sin upon him." (Lev. 19: 17.) This, however, is an individual obligation, with which the churches, in their associated capacity, have no concern. "For what have I to do to judge them also that are without? Do not ye judge them that are within? But them that are without, God judgeth." (1 Cor. 5: 12, 13.) The rule before us, in its full extent, is applicable only to persons who hold a standing in some Christian congregation. These, in becoming members of the body, have voluntarily made themselves amenable to the body, under the law of Christ its Head.

2. The next point demanding attention, is the inquiry, how far the rule under consideration extends. Was it designed by our Lord merely for one particular class of offences, or for all? May it rightfully be dispensed with, except in cases of personal injury,

or is it to be regarded as strictly imperative in every case? It will readily be seen that these are questions of great practical importance; since upon their decision it must depend, whether by far the larger number of wrongs committed by church members shall be treated in accordance with a regular and uniform method, or left to the ever varying judgment of the churches. Let it be understood that the obligation to comply with the rule, in all its details, reaches only to a single class of offences, those committed specially against individuals,—and there is reason to apprehend that it will scarcely be complied with at all. Even in respect to those cases which belong most strictly and obviously to the class designated, the law, in very numerous instances, will be evaded.

The following example of such evasion, is one of many that have fallen under the writer's observation: At a business meeting of the church in A—, Brother B— arose, and remarked that he thought it his duty to bring to the notice of the body, the case of Br. C—, with whom he had had some difficulty in a recent business transaction, and whom he proceeded to charge with gross dishonesty, and a palpable violation of his word. He was interrupted by Br. D—, who wished to inquire whether the case had been regularly matured for the action of the church, by the performance of the preliminary labors prescribed in the 18th of Matthew. In reply, Br. B— stated that he had performed no such labors, nor did he deem them necessary. He regarded the case as by no means coming within the rule referred to. It was true, he had suffer-

ed personal injury, but this was not the subject of his complaint. He chose to pass it by in silence. What he charged upon Br. C—, was the simple fact that he had wickedly and dishonestly refused to fulfil certain business engagements. The rule in the 18th of Matthew, he thought, contemplated only such offences as were strictly personal; but this, he contended, was clearly a case of flagrant immorality. Br. D—, with one or two others, objected to this view of the subject; but the church practically sustained it, by receiving the complaint. It then became a question, whether the matter should be investigated in open church meeting, or referred to a committee, to examine into the merits of the case, and report. The brethren found themselves unable to agree upon either course; and at length resolved that the difficulty should be settled by arbitration, each of the parties selecting an umpire, and these two a third.

In the whole of this strange movement, there was not a single trace of such disciplinary action as the law of Christ requires. Allowing the complaint to have been just, the offence was strictly personal. The fact that it involved immorality could make no difference. All personal offences involve immorality. The case, therefore, according to Br. B—'s own view of the rule in the 18th of Matthew, ought to have been treated as that rule prescribes. He had no right to bring his complaint to the church, until in the true spirit of the rule, he had performed the preliminary labors enjoined. The church had no right, without evidence of such labors having been performed, to en-

ertain it,—or, having entertained it, to turn it over for decision to the arbitration of a few individuals, who might, or might not be men of sound judgment and tried integrity. Yet all this was actually done. Nor is the above, by any means, a solitary instance of departure from the rule in similar cases. The writer once sat in council with other pastors and brethren, upon an old, inveterate, and complicated difficulty between two church members and their families, during the investigation of which, it became necessary to refer to certain by-laws, or rules of order and discipline, by which the church was understood to regulate its proceedings. For cases of personal offence, or difficulty, this singular document pointed out three distinct modes of treatment, either of which it was at the option of the aggrieved party to pursue. Whether the scriptural mode was included as one of the three, is not now recollectec. In respect to other offences, as might have been supposed, a still wider latitude was given.

But to return to the question ;—Is it true, that the rule under examination contemplates such offences only as are strictly personal? The phrase, “if thy brother shall *trespass against thee,*” has been thought by many to favor this conclusion. Such appears to have been Fuller’s opinion; for while he suggests that, in some other cases, love would dictate a course based upon the principle of the rule,—he speaks of the rule itself, as if it were designed especially and emphatically for cases of personal injury. “In all cases of *personal offence,*” he says, “the rule laid down by our

Lord in the eighteenth chapter of Matthew, ought to be attended to ; and no such offence ought to be admitted before a church, till the precept of Christ has been first complied with, by the party or parties concerned.”\* It is here supposed, that the obligation to attend strictly to the rule, is limited to the particular class of offences named. As this opinion prevails somewhat extensively, and as it seems to give a tacit sanction to almost any irregularity in the treatment of offences not belonging to the specified class,—it may be necessary to exhibit briefly the evidences that the rule was designed for universal application.

(a) It is important to observe, in the first place, that our Lord, when he gave the rule in question, was speaking of *σκανδάλων*, scandals, or occasions of stumbling,—including not only personal aggressions, but all such offences, of whatever kind, as might cause others to offend, or fall into sin. (Matt. 18 : 7, &c.) Having solemnly warned his disciples against thus offending, or being offended, he proceeds, (v. 15—17,) to give them explicit instructions in relation to the treatment of offences committed by their fellow disciples. From the obvious fact that these instructions are closely and intimately connected with what precedes them, as a part of the same unbroken discourse, the general subject of which remains unchanged,—it seems but reasonable to conclude, that the rule, thus furnished, was intended by our Lord for such offences as he had previously named,—that is, for whatever is

\* Works, vol. II. p. 464.

embraced in the general term, *scandal*. At least, before it can rightfully be restricted in its application, to a single class of those offences, it ought to be shown conclusively that something in the phraseology of the rule itself demands such restriction. This, it is believed, cannot be shown. Allowing the phrase, “if thy brother shall *trespass against thee*,” to be a correct rendering, and a case of personal offence to be specially intended,—still, it does not follow that the application of the rule to other offences would be contrary to the will of our Lord. A special direction is found in Titus 3:10, that, after the first and second admonition, a man that is an heretic should be rejected; but does it therefore follow that no other offender should be rejected? Besides,—the disciples of Christ are bound to regard every offence against him, as in some sense committed against themselves; so that the phrase in question, instead of limiting the rule, makes it in fact universal. “The offence is a trespass against *thee*; if thy brother do any thing which is offensive to thee as a Christian. Note, Christ and believers have common interests; what is done against them, Christ takes as done against himself; and what is done against him, they cannot but take as done against themselves. The reproaches of them that reproached thee, are fallen upon me. Ps. 69:9.”\*

(b) A farther argument for the universal application of the rule in question, may be drawn from its universal fitness. It is obviously capable of being ex-

\* Matthew Henry.

tended, without restriction or limitation, to all offences; nor would it be an easy matter, to show wherein it is less wisely adapted to such as are public and general, than to such as are private and personal. There is no apparent reason, why, in cases of the former kind, as in those of the latter, the same happy results may not be confidently anticipated from its strict and faithful observance, and the same pernicious consequences justly apprehended from its neglect. If it be admitted, (as it must be,) that in cases of personal offence, the rule prescribes the very measures best calculated to accomplish the object it contemplates,—that is, the recovery of the offender to repentance, or, if this cannot be effected, his removal by an orderly and harmonious act from the fellowship of the body,—then, certainly, the restricted interpretation of the rule ought not to be adopted, without satisfactory proof that, in cases of misconduct involving no personal aggression, the same object can be better accomplished by other means. But whence is such proof to be derived? If, in cases belonging to the latter class, the rule be dispensed with, by what rule, it may be demanded, are they to be treated? Neither Christ nor his apostles have pointed out any other mode of disciplinary action; and every wrong not committed directly against an individual, by this limitation of the rule, is left to be treated as the discretion of individuals or of churches may dictate.

(c) But farther,—The spirit of Christianity itself would demand, that in all cases of flagrant wrong, whether personal or general, a course of treatment

should be adopted, not differing essentially from that which the rule prescribes. He who loves his offending brother, and would do him good,—whatever the offence may be, will be slow to proclaim it to others. The compassionate regard which he feels towards his erring fellow disciple, will incline him, in the first place, to attempt his reclamation in a private interview, agreeably to the direction, “Go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone ;” and not to disclose it to the church, until a repetition of that attempt, aided by “one or two more” judicious brethren, has been found unavailing. Indeed, a church member, becoming aware that one of his brethren has committed a fault requiring discipline, cannot proceed at once to bring the matter to the notice of the body, without a violation of the great law of the Master, “Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them.” It is not thus that he would be treated, under similar circumstances. Let him imagine himself the offender,—and inquire whether a full exposure of his wrong in open church meeting, or a private effort to win him back to duty, would indicate most clearly a kind and brotherly desire to do him good, or be most likely to melt his heart, and to awaken in him an ingenuous sorrow for his sin ? The answer will show him what is his own duty towards one who has been overtaken in a fault. There is, therefore, no room for the contemplated limitation of the rule. It matters not what the wrong may be,—whether personal or general, whether private or public ;—the law, unless

its divine Author has himself made an exception to it, is universal.

In fact, Fuller himself had well nigh attained to the same conclusion. "In many cases," he remarks, "where faults are not committed immediately against us, but which are unknown except to a few individuals, love will lead us to endeavor to reclaim the party, if possible, without any farther exposure. A just man will not be willing, unnecessarily, to make his brother a public example.—In cases of evil report, where things are said of a brother in our hearing, which, if true, must affect his character, and the purity of the church, it cannot be right to go on to report it. Love will not lead to this.—No time, therefore, should be lost, ere we inquire at the hand of our brother," &c.\* He saw clearly the beauty and excellency of the rule, and was evidently conscious that it might be extended with advantage somewhat beyond those offences which were strictly personal; but he seems to have had no distinct perception of the authority for its unlimited extension. Hence, the extreme caution with which he suggests the partial application of that rule to faults "not committed immediately against us,"—and his care to include in the suggestion, only those offences "which are unknown except to a few individuals." In regard to this last point, it should be remarked, that a church member has nothing to do with the question, whether an offence committed by a brother be known to few, or many. The fact that he himself knows it, whatever others may know, lays him under an obliga-

\* Works, vol. II. p. 464.

tion which he may not innocently seek to evade, to attempt the recovery of the offender by such means as the law prescribes.

(d) The opinion that the rule was designed, not merely for personal offences, but for all, is confirmed by several passages in the epistles, which evidently contemplate its application to wrongs of a general character. One of these passages is that, in Titus 3 : 10, to which we have already had repeated occasion to allude. "A man that is an heretic, (or one guilty of a factious departure from some fundamental point of the Christian faith or practice, as, according to New Testament usage, the original word, *αἵρετος* implies,) after the first and second admonition, reject." The offence here supposed is not personal; yet, in regard to its treatment, the apostle refers familiarly to the first and second admonition, as preliminary stages in a well known process of corrective discipline. As these steps are expressly enjoined in the rule of our Lord, and not elsewhere, the conclusion is unavoidable that he must have had that rule in view. Again, "If any of you do err from the truth, (or turn aside in any manner from the path of uprightness,) and one convert him,—let him know that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way, (or from his wandering,) shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins." (James 5 : 19, 20.) Here, also, the writer commends the same individual effort to reclaim a wandering brother, which Christ had directed in the rule,—and urges it upon the same ground. "If one convert him, he shall save a soul from death." "If he shall

hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother." Still farther, "If a man be overtaken in a fault, (that is, if he fall inadvertently into sin,) ye which are spiritual restore (*καταργήσετες*, recover,) such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted." (Gal. 6 : 1.) The passage contemplates individual action, and corresponds with the injunction in the rule, "Go and tell him his fault," or, rather, convince him of his sin. None of the wrongs here named are supposed to be committed against individuals; yet, in every case, the duty of individuals to apply such corrective measures as the rule prescribes, is distinctly recognized.

But, enough;—the point under consideration is believed to be made out. No farther argument is deemed necessary, to establish the position, that the great law enacted by Jesus Christ, and recorded in the passage before us, is the universal law of corrective church discipline; and that all offences, requiring disciplinary action, are to be treated in accordance with its provisions.

#### § 16. OFFENCES DEMANDING CORRECTIVE DISCIPLINE.

The inquiry next arises, What constitutes a disciplinable offence?\* What kinds, and what degrees of wrong,

\* High crimes and misdemeanors are not disciplinable. In such cases, the offender is ordinarily either in the custody of the law, or a fugitive from justice, so that the application of the rule is impracticable. The church, therefore, to which he belongs, has

in a church member, should be regarded as demanding the application of the rule? For, as Fuller justly observes, "We are not to suppose that no irregularity or imperfection whatever, is an object of forbearance. If uniformity be required in such a degree as that every difference in judgment or practice shall occasion a separation, the churches may be always dividing into parties, which we are persuaded was never encouraged by the apostles of our Lord, and cannot be justified in trivial or ordinary cases. A contrary practice is expressly taught us in the epistle to the Romans, (chap. 14,) and the cases in which it is to be exercised are there pointed out. An object of forbearance, however, must be one that may exist without being an occasion of dispute and wrangling in the church. It must not be to doubtful disputations. (v. 1.) It must also respect things which do not enter into the essence of God's kingdom, the leading principles of which are righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost. (v. 16, 17.) That which does not subvert the gospel of the kingdom, nor set aside the authority of the king, though it be an imperfection, is yet to be borne with. Finally, it must be something which does not destroy the work of God, or which is not inconsistent with the progress of vital religion in the church, or in one's own soul. (v. 20.) In all such cases we are not to judge one

nothing to do but to "clear itself," by a public act of disfellowship, from all appearance of conniving at his sin. A similar course is to be pursued in all cases, where the offender is absolutely beyond the reach of the church.

another, but every man's conscience is to be his judge. (v. 23.)\*\*

In the present state of things, it is not to be expected that church members will be entirely faultless. Even in those whose general deportment and conduct are such as to render their piety unquestionable, there may be found a thousand imperfections, and weaknesses, and blemishes of Christian character, so slight as not to demand a strict application of the rule. The correction of these minor and comparatively trifling evils, is to be sought, not by those decisive disciplinary measures which, in cases of more flagrant misconduct, are indispensable,—but by kind and brotherly suggestions, counsels, and admonitions; and if these gentler methods prove unavailing, it would seem to be the part of charity, patiently to endure what it has failed to remove. They that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please themselves. (Rom. 15:1.) It is the deadly moral gangrene, which, when proved to be incurable, demands the excision of a member; and not the mere spots and wrinkles, which, though they mar somewhat the beauty of the church, yet threaten no fatal consequences. The law of corrective church discipline was designed for wrongs, so malignant in their nature and tendency, that they cannot be tolerated without endangering the purity, harmony, and efficiency of the body in which they are found; for evils so glaring, that they cannot innocently be overlooked, or suffered to pass uncensur-

\* Works, vol. ii. p. 463.

ed ; for offences so rank, that, if persisted in, they must involve a forfeiture of Christian character.

1. One class of offences, to which the corrective measures enjoined in the rule should promptly be applied, may be embraced under the general term, heresies. He who is guilty of a factious denial of the truth, or who embraces and seeks to disseminate error, in relation to any fundamental point of Christian doctrine or duty, is, in the scriptural sense of the term, a heretic ; and, as we have seen, if, after the first and second admonition, he still persist in his wrong, he is to be rejected. (Titus 3 : 10.) It was not intended, however, that this direction should be applied to such as are only weak in the faith. (Rom. 14 : 1.) A failure, through the want of mental power, or mental culture, to grasp the sublimer mysteries of the Christian system, is not to be imputed as a fault. It is the man who pertinaciously adheres to unscriptural dogmas, whether originating with himself or others,—who captiously rejects whatever he is unable to comprehend, or unwilling to admit, though distinctly revealed in the volume of inspiration,—who gives himself to perverse disputings, and refuses his assent to the doctrine which is according to godliness,—that is to be reckoned guilty of heresy. (1 Tim. 6 : 3—5.) From such as continue, after the appointed means have been tried to reclaim them, to bear this character, the churches are instructed to withdraw themselves. “I would,” says Paul, “they were even cut off that trouble you.” (Gal. 5 : 12, comp. 1 : 6, 7. See also Rev. 2 : 14, 15.) Persons of this description cannot

safely be permitted to retain a standing as members of the churches. He that is such is subverted, and will be a ready instrument of the subversion of others. He sinneth, being condemned of himself; and the contagion of his corrupting example should at once be removed. (*Titus 3:11.*) To hold him longer in fellowship is utterly impracticable; since he sets himself against the truth upon which the church is based, and which she is bound to defend,—nay, upon the maintenance of which her very existence depends. “If the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do?” (*Ps. 11:3.*)

Under the term, heresy,—implying, as it does, a departure in some essential particular, either from the doctrine of Christ, or from the practice he has enjoined,—must be included those erroneous views of the positive institutions appointed for the perpetual observance of the churches, which lead to their rejection, or to any material change in them. Baptism and the eucharist are emblematical,—this of the passion of our Lord, and that of his triumphant resurrection from the grave. They were designed to keep in memory, by a visible and public representation, the two cardinal facts of the Christian system,—first, “how that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures;” and secondly, “that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the Scriptures.” (*1 Cor. 15:3, 4; 11:26; Rom. 6:3,—5.*) It is obvious, therefore, that the full significancy of these ordinances must depend upon their being kept as they were delivered. That they be so kept, is

essential,—not, indeed, to salvation, for none but the saved can rightfully participate in either,—but to Christian obedience, and to the accomplishment of the important purposes for which they were designed. He who rejects the true doctrine of the eucharist, and embraces the error which affirms the real presence, and forbids the cup to the laity, is no less really a heretic, than he who denies the atonement. In like manner, he who rejects the true doctrine of baptism, and embraces the error which substitutes in its place a totally different rite, and extends that rite to others than professed believers, is no less really a heretic, than he who says that there is no resurrection, and that Christ is not risen. It follows, that members of Baptist churches, adopting Pedobaptist views, and wishing to become connected with Pedobaptist congregations, cannot consistently be dismissed as in good and regular standing. Christian courtesy would indeed seem to demand, that certificates of moral character should be furnished them, if requested; yet, in all such cases, the law requires that the fellowship of the churches from which they thus go out, should be withdrawn.\*

It has been denied by many, and especially by such as have been excommunicated for heretical opinions or practices, that a difference of views in respect to reli-

\* A distinction should be made between Christian fellowship, and church fellowship. We cannot withhold the former from any, whatever may be their errors, who give evidence of genuine piety. We cannot extend the latter to any, whatever may be their piety, who embrace errors subversive of the Christian doctrine or ordinances.

gious truth is properly an occasion of disciplinary action. To make it so, they have contended, is an invasion of the right of private judgment,—an act of spiritual tyranny, on the part of those who have no better authority to decide what is, and what is not heresy, than they themselves. Hence, they have generally affected to look upon themselves as the victims of persecution, and to demand that the sympathies of the public should be extended to them, as sufferers in the cause of human rights. To all this, plausible as it may appear, a sufficient reply is found in the scriptural injunctions, “From such withdraw thyself,—I would they were even cut off,—A man that is an heretic, reject.” A compliance with these injunctions is not persecution. The rejection from a church’s fellowship of one who is believed to have departed from the faith, is no invasion of his right of judgment;—it is only the vindication and exercise of an equal right of judgment in the church itself. “To suppose it impossible,” says Fuller, “to judge what heresy is, or to deny that the power of so deciding rests in a Christian church, is to charge the apostolic precept with impertinence. It is true, the judgment of a church may be erroneous as well as that of an individual; and it becomes them in their decisions to consider that they will all be revised at the great day; but the same may be said of all human judgment, civil or judicial, to which no one is so void of reason, as on this account to object.”\*

\* Works, vol. ii. p. 466.

2. Another class of wrongs, which cannot be safely tolerated in a church, includes whatever has a tendency to interrupt the harmony of its members,—to banish that reciprocal confidence and affection which ought ever to subsist among them, and thus to destroy or weaken the bond of union so essential to the integrity of the body. “Now I beseech you, brethren,” says an apostle, “mark them which cause divisions, and offences, contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them. For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly; and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple.” (Rom. 16:17, 18.) If any who have found their way into a Christian church, evince a contentious spirit; if they take a malignant pleasure in fomenting discord and dissension among their brethren; if they contumaciously set themselves against the authority of the body; or if they seek, by insinuating and artful pretences, to gather a party of their own, which shall resist or control its decisions;—they should no longer be recognized as servants of our Lord Jesus Christ, but are to be marked and avoided as his enemies. They have sufficiently manifested their indifference to his cause, (and it should be recollect ed that, in this case, indifference is equivalent to hostility,—Matt. 12:30,) by their readiness to sacrifice its dearest interests to the promotion of their own selfish purposes. They have not hesitated, for the gratification of their unholy passions, to break the unity of the Spirit, and the bond of peace. They have aimed, by separating the members of the church into hostile

and opposing parties, to introduce a schism into the body of Christ. It is obviously impossible for a church in which such things are allowed, to enjoy a high measure of prosperity. The well known axiom, that "union is strength," is no less true of the visible kingdom of the Redeemer, and of every particular branch of that kingdom, than it is of worldly combinations. Of this, the great enemy of all righteousness is perfectly aware; and accordingly, he has ever acted in the spirit of the maxim, "Divide, and conquer." It is his favorite policy to induce those who bear the Christian name, instead of turning their combined energies against the common foe, to employ their resources in efforts to annoy each other; and the disastrous consequences of his success are recorded upon the pages of ecclesiastical history, in characters of blood. In the language of the prophet, "the people that did know their God have fallen by the sword, and by flame, by captivity, and by spoil, many days,"—until millions on millions of Christian martyrs have been slaughtered, in the name of Christ! Of the church in general, and of particular associations of Christians, it may be said with equal truth, that they can be happy and prosperous, only when united harmoniously together in the same mind and the same judgment. It follows, therefore, that each separate church is bound by a suitable regard to its own welfare, to place upon whatever has a tendency to interrupt this harmonious union of its members, the mark of its decided disapprobation.

And yet, the simple fact that an individual church

member may deem it his duty to dissent from some act of the body, ought not to subject him to censure. He is not to be blamed because he may conscientiously differ in opinion from his brethren; for, as Fuller says, "the judgment of a church may be erroneous, as well as that of an individual." In all such cases, the brother objecting to a measure, either under consideration, or already passed, should be patiently heard; the reasons he may urge should be calmly and dispassionately examined in the light of Scripture, and the full weight to which they are entitled should be cheerfully given them. The churches are deliberative, democratic bodies, charged with the execution of the laws of Christ, and deciding by majorities upon such measures as, in their judgment, may be best adapted to carry into effect the Master's will. In the discussion of these measures, each member has a right freely to avow his own opinions, and as freely to canvass the opinions avowed by others; and the exercise of this right, if a Christian temper be maintained, instead of weakening, tends actually to strengthen the bond of Christian union. It is not the man who merely claims the rights of a man, and who "gives place by subjection, no, not for an hour," to any who would invade these rights, that is to be marked and avoided as a schismatic; but he who seeks to divide that he may rule; who selfishly prefers his own interests to the peace of the church, and who employs arts worthy only of a political demagogue, to impose upon the weak-minded, and bend them to his will.

### 3. A third class of offences demanding disciplinary

action, may be comprehended under the general name of ungodliness, or irreligion,—embracing, as it does, whatever involves a direct refusal to comply with religious obligations, or to perform those duties which we owe specially to God. Many assume a form of godliness, who afterwards evince, by a series of flagrant delinquencies, that they know nothing of its power. The seeming fervor of their first love rapidly declines; they become habitually negligent of the Christian ordinances and worship; devotional exercises are abandoned for worldly pursuits and amusements; and they seek happiness in worldly associations, rather than in the assemblies of the saints. They desert the highway of holiness, cast up for the ransomed of the Lord, and are found walking in the counsel of the ungodly, standing in the way of sinners, and ultimately, perhaps, sitting in the seat of the scornful. (Ps. 1:1.) Now it is evident that the churches were never designed to afford shelter to such as these. If they cannot be recovered from the course of declension upon which they have entered, they should be separated from the communion of the faithful, before the corrupting influence of their example has extended itself through the body to which they belong. No time should be lost, when a church member is known to have become habitually negligent of the public ordinances, or private duties of religion, in applying the salutary corrective measures indicated in the great law of discipline; and if suitable efforts to reclaim him prove unavailing, the fellowship of the church should be withdrawn. These remarks have no reference to those truly conscientious,

but, perhaps, weak-minded disciples, who, under an overwhelming conviction of their own deep vileness, sometimes shrink for a season from a personal participation in the more awful services of religion,—deeming it sacrilege for such as they to handle and taste the consecrated symbols of the Saviour's passion, and trembling at the thought even of approaching the mercy-seat. Instead of being cast off, these fearful ones should be encouraged; and their painful hesitancy in respect to religious duties, arising from feebleness of faith, or an over-scrupulous conscience, though it may be a trial to their brethren, should be charitably borne. They should be treated with the same kindness, and gentleness, which appeared in the reply of Jesus to one who exclaimed, in astonishment and terror at the manifestation of his divine glory, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." (Luke 5:8, 10.) There can be little difficulty in making a proper distinction between persons of this description, and those who forsake the sanctuary from aversion to its holy services, and who shun the society of Christians, that, like Demas, they may indulge themselves without restraint in the love of this present world.

Covetousness, in all its varied modes of development, belongs to the class of evils under consideration. The voice of inspiration has pronounced it idolatry, and ranked it with crimes of the most detestable character. (Col. 3:5; 1 Cor. 5:11.) It is a mother sin,—“the root of all evil,”—the occasion of every species of ungodliness,—the broadest and the most frequented gate-way that leads to destruction and

perdition. (1 Tim. 6:5, 9, 10.) It is odious in the sight of God, and will not fail to bring down his wrath upon the man, whatever may be his pretensions to piety, who bears upon him this mark of the children of disobedience. (Col. 3:6.) The churches are therefore directed to "put away from among themselves that wicked person." Whether his covetousness be manifested in some flagrant act of dishonesty, fraud, or extortion, or in a refusal to bear his proportion of the necessary expenditures of the church to which he belongs,—they are commanded "not to keep company with such an one; no, not to eat." (1 Cor. 5:11, 13.)\*

Precisely similar are the instructions of the apostle, in respect to those church members who go to the opposite extreme,—and who, instead of exhibiting an excessive and idolatrous love of gain, are criminally regardless of their obligations to provide, by a course of honest industry, for their own wants, and the wants of their families. A delinquency of this kind involves a practical denial of the faith, and is worse even than theoretical infidelity. (1 Tim. 5:8.) It is not only in itself a disorder, which the churches are forbidden to tolerate; but it tends to prepare the way for still greater improprieties. He who is thus idle, and negligent of his own concerns, will generally be found sufficiently busy in other men's matters. (1 Peter 4:15; 1 Tim. 5:13.) The law in regard to offenders of this description, is full, and explicit. "Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus

\* See the note under § 6.

Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the traditions which ye received of us. For even when we were with you, this we commanded you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat. For we hear that there are some which walk among you disorderly, working not at all, but are busy-bodies. Now them that are such, we command and exhort by our Lord Jesus Christ, that with quietness they work, and eat their own bread. And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother." (2 Thess. 3 : 6, 10—15.)

It is somewhat singular, that Fuller finds in this passage, "no mention made of exclusion, either immediate or ultimate." Such an opinion can scarcely be reconciled with the positive directions, "*Withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly,*"—"Note that man, and *have no company* with him." The *withdrawal* here enjoined upon the church, is certainly equivalent to an act of exclusion. If this be denied, then with equal reason may it be denied that the persons mentioned in 1 Tim. 6 : 3—5, and 2 Tim. 3 : 2—5, were to be excluded. The other expression corresponds with that in Rom. 16 : 17, "*Mark them which cause divisions and offences, and avoid them,*" and is identical with that in 1 Cor. 5 : 11, "*Keep no company* with such an one, no, not to eat." It prescribes the course to be pursued towards persons lying under the censure of the church. "If," says Fuller, "they still continue in a state of impenitence,

persist in their sin, or be irreconciled to the church's proceedings with them, it is of the utmost consequence that every member should act a uniform part towards them. We may, it is true, continue our ordinary and necessary intercourse with them as men, in the concerns of this life : but there must be no familiarity, no social interchange, no visitings to them, nor receiving visits from them, nothing in short that is expressive of connivance at their conduct. If individual members act contrary to this rule, and carry it freely towards an offender, as if nothing had taken place, it will render the censure of the church of none effect.”\* These remarks are doubtless just ; yet, in connexion with them, it is important to observe, that the excommunicated person is by no means to be abandoned as irreclaimable. Instead of being harshly repelled, as an enemy, he should still be admonished from time to time, as a fallen brother, whose recovery would be hailed as an occasion of joy.

4. Still another class of offences may include all such as are personal. “If thy brother grieve, affront, contemn, or abuse thee ; if he blemish thy good name, encroach on thy rights, or injure thee in thy estate ; if he transgress the laws of justice, charity, or relative duties ;—these are trespasses against us, and often happen among Christ’s disciples, and sometimes, for want of prudence, are of very mischievous consequence.”† It will be conceded that wrongs of this description, if evidently premeditated and designed,

\* Works, vol. II. pp. 464—5.

† Matthew Henry.

demand the prompt application of the rule. Christian charity would, indeed, forbid that a man should be made an offender for a word rashly spoken, or for an unintentional injury; but if it be obvious that the injurious word or act has its origin in a malignant purpose, charity itself would require that the corrective measures enjoined in the law should be carried into effect.

5. The grosser immoralities, including offences against the law of chastity, intemperance, profaneness, falsehood, and other scandalous vices and crimes, constitute another class of wrongs, which it is sufficient merely to mention in this enumeration. No argument is necessary, to prove that the churches cannot, consistently with their own purity and honor, have fellowship with these deeds of darkness; and that the guilty perpetrators, whenever their true character becomes known, should speedily be put away from among them. In short, whatever involves a denial of any fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith, or a violation of any fundamental principle of Christian duty; whatever is incompatible with the habitual exercise of love to God, and love to man; whatever contravenes the claims of justice or of mercy, or is inconsistent with an humble, holy walking with God, must be regarded as an offence against the law of Christ, and, if committed by one who has a name and a place among his professed disciples, as demanding the salutary discipline which that law prescribes. Slight imperfections of character may, indeed, be charitably overlooked. Nay, they must be, according to the principle that "the strong ought to bear the infirmi-

ties of the weak." But when these darker and more malignant evils appear in church members, the reformative measures ordained by the great Head of the church, become solemnly imperative, and may not innocently be neglected.

#### § 17. THE PROCESS OF CORRECTIVE DISCIPLINE.

In the process of corrective discipline, as indicated by our Lord, the first thing to be done is privately to admonish the offender. This admonition should be administered by a single individual; and, if necessary, it must be repeated by the same individual, with one or two more whom he may call to his aid. These individual labors constitute, it is believed, what the apostle calls the first admonition. In the next place, if the offender be not already reclaimed, it devolves upon the church to which he belongs, having heard the case, and ascertained by a full and fair investigation that the alleged wrong has actually been committed, to administer a second admonition. And lastly, if it be found, after the offender has had suitable time for reflection, that the united remonstrance of his brethren has failed to produce the desired effect upon him, he should be rejected by a solemn act of the body from their fellowship. It may be well, for the purpose of exhibiting more largely these several steps in the process, to present a brief exposition of the law in which they are enjoined.

## 1. THE FIRST ADMONITION.

"Moreover, if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone." The question whether offences in general, or only those belonging to a particular class, are to be treated in accordance with this rule, has already been discussed under § 15. It was there shown, that the rule is capable of universal application ; that there is nothing in its language, necessarily restricting it to personal injuries ; that its extension to wrongs of a different character, is evidently contemplated in several passages of the epistles ; that a virtual adhérance to it, in all cases, is demanded by the great law of love ; and, in fact, that, beside this, no other rule of corrective discipline is to be found in the New Testament. Whatever the offence may be, therefore, whether private or public, whether personal or general, the course to be pursued is essentially the same. In the first place, a private interview must be had with the offender, and a private admonition must be administered.

(a) If the offence be personal, and if it be known only to the individual against whom it is committed, the duty of private admonition belongs, primarily, to that individual. He is not at liberty to proclaim the wrong he has suffered. It is to be told, not to others, but to the offender himself; and to remain, for the present, between his reprobator and him alone. A premature disclosure of the matter may inflict a needless injury upon the reputation of the wrong-doer, and

bring a needless reproach upon the Christian name. It must be whispered, therefore, to no mortal ear, save that of the trespasser, until the law of Christ requires it; and then, only in the manner which that law prescribes.

(b) If a personal offence be known, not only to the injured party, but to others also, still, neither he nor they can be justifiable in giving it greater publicity. In this case, as in the preceding, (a) the duty of private admonition is obviously binding upon the individual against whom the offence is committed. At the same time, however, it is equally binding upon the other brethren, severally, who may be apprised of the wrong. This is clearly in accordance with the principle, that "if one member suffer, all the members suffer with it." (1 Cor. 12:26.) Each is bound to sympathize with his injured brother, and to act in the spirit of the apostle, when he said, "Who is offended, and I burn not?" (2 Cor. 11:29.) Let the offender, real or supposed, be thus faithfully reproved, by one, and another, and another of his brethren, each acting alone and independently of the rest, and all evincing a brotherly solicitude to reclaim him from his wrong;—and if his heart be not broken, it must be because he is either fearfully hardened in sin, or firm in the consciousness of integrity.

(c) If a personal offence be unknown to the injured party, but known to others, the duty of private admonition rests alike upon each of the latter. For example, Peter, James, and John have no right to inform Andrew that a slanderous report, highly injurious to

his character, has been put in circulation by Thomas. If such be the fact, and if they are aware of it,—their first business, severally, is with Thomas. Each is bound by the law to go to him, and tell him his fault; but, as yet they are not at liberty to tell it elsewhere. There is no necessity that Andrew should know anything of the matter, until he learns it from the confession of Thomas; or until, in the regular course of discipline, one of the other three is prepared to bring a complaint to the church. Should Andrew, however, be apprised of it by other means, and at an earlier period, the case loses its distinctive character, and becomes identical with that which precedes it. (b)

(d) In the foregoing cases, all the parties are supposed to be church members. If the individual against whom a personal offence is committed, be not a church member, the duty of private admonition falls upon each of the brethren of the offender, who may have knowledge of the case.

(e) In respect to offences which are not personal, heresies, schisms, scandals, &c. the rule is the same. The duty of private admonition rests upon that church member, whoever he may be, who first knows that such an offence has been committed by a brother. If many know it, the obligation to perform this service is binding alike upon each; nor can any one neglect it, without himself becoming justly liable to the charge of criminal delinquency.

The law evidently contemplates the recovery of the offender, and carefully guards his reputation from all unnecessary injury. So should he who undertakes

to execute the law. When he perceives in his brother a wrong, demanding disciplinary measures, it cannot be right that he should publish and blaze abroad the matter,—that he should repeat it from house to house,—that he should proclaim it in the church meeting, and require that it be investigated by a church committee. This is not the course that love would dictate. It is not what the law directs. It is not the way to reclaim a wandering brother. Such a wanton and wicked exposure of his wrongs will only exasperate his feelings, and throw an obstacle in the way of his recovery which will not be easily overcome. And yet, there are many in the churches, who hesitate not to pursue this very course,—and who boldly undertake to justify themselves in so doing, on the ground, as they allege, that the rule has respect only to private and personal offences. These are themselves transgressors, and need to be reclaimed. He who would raise a fallen brother, must not begin by reporting his wrong, either to the church or to the world. "If thou wouldest convince him, do not expose him. Let the reproof be private, that it may appear you seek not his reproach, but his repentance. It is a good rule, not to speak of our brethren's faults to others, till we have first spoken of them to themselves. This would make less reproaching, and more reproving; less sin committed, and more duty done. It will be likely to work on an offender, when he sees his reprobate concerned not only for his salvation, in telling him his fault; but for his reputation, in telling him of it privately."\* "Debate thy

\* Matthew Henry.

cause with thy neighbor himself; and discover not a secret to another." (Prov. 25: 9.) "Go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone."

In performing this duty, the complainant should make a statement of the facts in the case,—pointing out distinctly the offensive act, but not assuming to judge the offender's motives. He should invite the attention of his sinning brother to the law he has transgressed, explain its true spirit and meaning, and show wherein it has been violated; listen to any explanation, defence, or confession that may be offered; and strive, by reasoning the matter with him, to bring him to a proper sense of his wrong, and to induce him to make such reparation as the nature of the case may demand.

"If he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother." The object to be sought in this private admonition, is here distinctly presented to view. It is to gain a brother. It is not to wound him, with harsh and bitter upbraiding; but if possible, by kind yet earnest remonstrance, to reclaim him from his wrong. Whoever would prosecute such a work successfully, must divest himself of prejudice and personal resentment. He must speak the truth in love; prepared, on the one hand, to meet a rude repulse with patience and forbearance,—or, on the other, to hail the first tokens of contrition, and to restore the penitent offender in the spirit of meekness. (Gal. 6: 1.) "If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him." (Luke 17: 3.) A mere profession of repentance, however, which is obviously insincere, is not to be received as satisfactory. If that repentance

be genuine, it will manifest itself in appropriate acts. Reproof will be submissively and thankfully received; the offence will be confessed and forsaken; and the offender will promptly and voluntarily make such reparation as may be in his power. He will say with the Psalmist, practically at least, "Let the righteous smite me; it shall be a kindness: and let him reprove me; it shall be an excellent oil, which shall not break my head." (Ps. 141:5.) These are fruits meet for repentance; and in ordinary cases, they are all that can be required. If they appear, it is well. The offending brother is gained,—a sinner is converted from the error of his ways,—and his faithful reprobate finds his reward in the assurance that he has been the honored instrument of saving a soul from death, and of hiding a multitude of sins. (James 5:20.)

"But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established." If the offender will not heed the admonition of an individual,—if he justify himself, and refuse to confess or repair his wrong,—the effort to reclaim him must be repeated, with the assistance of one or two more. These must be brethren,—not unbelievers, but fellow disciples; and if practicable, it seems desirable that they should be members of the same church with the offender. (1 Cor. 6: 1—7.) For obvious reasons, the persons selected for a service of this kind, should be men of known probity, experience, and sound judgment. This remark is fully sustained by the language of Paul, in 1 Cor. 6: 5, "Is it so, that there is not a

wise man among you? no, not one that shall be able to judge between his brethren?" If you are destined to participate in the judgment of the world, and of angels, (v. 2, 3,) can it be that there is none among you, competent to determine those smaller matters which pertain to this life? The expression in the preceding verse, 'Set them to judge who are least esteemed in the church,' is to be understood as a delicate irony,—as if he had said, Do so, if you can think it right; but if your own sense of propriety forbid this, how much more will it forbid that brother should go to law with brother before the unbelievers! The duty of the complainant, with one or two more, is essentially the same that he had previously performed alone. The assistant brethren should patiently hear both the complaint and the defence; carefully investigate the whole matter; and in the fear of God, judge between their brethren. If they find the accusation unsustained, they should advise that it be withdrawn. If they perceive, in either of the parties, an unchristian temper, a disposition to cast injurious reflections, or to engage in angry disputation, they should promptly rebuke it. They should permit themselves to be swayed by no prejudice; or party feeling; but act impartially, for God, and the right. It becomes their duty to aid the aggrieved party in his efforts to convince and reclaim the offender; and if the latter persist in his wrong, to appear as witnesses against him in the ultimate appeal to the church.

## 2. THE SECOND ADMONITION.

"And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church." Before this last act of individual labor is performed, the complainant should apprise the offender of his intention, that he may be present to answer. The brethren who have aided him in the previous labor should also be apprised of it, that they may be present to testify. And if there be other witnesses, whose testimony is necessary to a full understanding of the case, measures should be taken to secure their attendance. The church to which the offender belongs, having met together by previous appointment, and being informed that an offence has been committed by one of its members, and that the matter has been regularly matured for the action of the body, in the manner prescribed by the Christian law of discipline,—should proceed, without any unnecessary delay, to hear and judge the case.

No complaint, however, should be received, until it has been ascertained from the testimony of the brethren who have assisted in the private admonition, that this law has been faithfully complied with. If the complainant has failed to do what the law requires, he should be instructed in his duty, and have time to perform it. Or, if there has been a similar failure on the part of the one or two associated with him, the church should positively decline to act, until the preliminary process is completed. The point here insisted upon, is, in the estimation of the writer, one of very great

importance. Although, from the manner in which many churches conduct their discipline, it is evident that they do not so regard it,—he believes it essential to the full attainment of the objects for which the law of discipline was enacted. It is at least essential to Christian obedience, that the whole procedure, from beginning to end, should be in strict conformity to the rule. And yet, how often is the criminal delinquency of a complainant, in respect to the duty of private admonition, passed over as a mere informality! And how often is the complaint, thus preferred, entertained and immediately acted upon,—though the church is perfectly aware that the preparatory labors enjoined by our Lord, have been either entirely neglected, or only partially performed! It is scarcely reasonable to expect that offenders will be reclaimed, where the means which infinite wisdom has ordained for their reclamation, are thus disregarded.

If private admonition, faithfully administered according to the rule, be found to produce no satisfactory result,—it devolves upon the brother who has taken the lead in this preliminary process, to bring the whole matter to the notice of the body. If the trespasser will hear, neither him alone, nor one or two more associated with him, he must “tell it unto the church.” In discharging this duty, the complainant should look upon himself as sustaining the character, not of a public prosecutor, whose business it is to secure a conviction if he can,—but of a witness, who is bound by the most solemn obligations to exhibit the simple truth. He should therefore confine himself strictly to the facts in the case. The offence charged, should

be clearly and plainly stated ; the Christian law supposed to be violated, should be cited ; and the very act in which the offence is supposed to consist, should be distinctly specified. If that act be denied, it should be proved by the testimony of at least one witness besides the complainant. A full statement should be made, also, of the previous labor, and of the manner in which it was received ; and this statement should be confirmed by the testimony of the one or two who have been associated with the complainant in such labor.

The injunction, " Tell it unto the church," implies an obligation on the part of the church to hear, both the complaint, and the testimony by which it is sustained. A simple statement of facts, however, is all that should be heard. No bitter and reproachful comments upon these facts, no attempt to give them a false coloring, or in any way to excite indignation against the supposed offender, should for a moment be tolerated ; nor, on the other hand, should any disorderly interruption be allowed, on the part of the accused or his friends. Those angry controversies which sometimes arise in church meetings, cannot be otherwise than evil in their consequences ; and it is the duty of the pastor, or other presiding officer, to check, in its earliest beginnings, whatever has a tendency to produce them. The complaint having been presented, the accused, if he wish it, should also be heard, and have full opportunity of offering such testimony as he may deem necessary to a fair and impartial view of the case. In a word, it should be the object of the church, by deliberate, thorough investigation, to get at the

truth of the matter in question, and so to render equal justice both to the accuser and to the accused. No proposal to stifle inquiry, by permitting the latter silently to withdraw himself from the church, or dropping him from fellowship at his own request, to avoid the exposure of a public investigation, should be entertained. No unworthy church member should be separated from the body to which he belongs, otherwise than by a formal act of excommunication ; and no such act should be passed, until satisfactory proof of guilt is openly laid before the church. "Few churches," says Fuller, "would suffer a grossly immoral or litigious character to continue amongst them unnoticed : but if, instead of a calm, impartial and decided procedure, we enter into pusillanimous compromises with the offender, consenting that he should withdraw of his own accord ; if the crimes of rich men be either entirely overlooked, or but slightly touched, lest the cause should suffer from their being offended ; or if the misconduct of poor men be disregarded, on the ground of their being persons of little or no account,—are we not carnal, and walk as men ?—Such things ought not to be. The private withdrawal of an individual, if it be without good reason, may justify a church in admonishing him, and, if he cannot be reclaimed, in excluding him ; but it cannot of itself dissolve the relation. Till such exclusion has taken place, he is a member, and his conduct affects their reputation as much as that of any other member."\*

It belongs to the church, after proper investigation, to decide by vote whether the charge is, or is not sus-

\* Works, vol. ii. p. 465.

tained. If the accused brother be found not guilty, the complainant must cheerfully acquiesce in the decision. He is not at liberty to oppose his individual judgment to the united judgment of the body, or of a majority ; nor may he innocently cease to hold communion with his brethren in the Christian worship and ordinances, because they have not yielded their own opinions to his. He may sincerely believe them to be in error ; but until they are guilty of wrongs so flagrant as no longer to sustain the character of a Christian church, he has no right to separate himself from their fellowship. If, on the contrary, it be decided by the church that the charge is sustained, the offender, by a solemn act of the body, should be admonished to repent, and to make such reparation as may be due. If he be present, this second admonition should be administered by the pastor, or presiding officer, in behalf of the church, and in open church meeting. "Them that sin," says the apostle, "rebuke before all, that others also may fear." (1 Tim. 5 : 20.) Should the offender, though residing in the neighborhood, decline to be present, the admonition of the church may be conveyed to him by a judicious committee appointed specially to that service ; or, should his residence be so distant as to render this impracticable, it may be forwarded by letter. This last method should be resorted to only in case of necessity, for the plain reason that the voice of a living reprobate will be far more likely to prove effective ; nor should letters of admonition ever be sent, until they have received the approbation of the body.

## 3. THE FINAL ACT OF DISCIPLINE.

"But if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican." To hear the church, is to heed her admonition. If the fault of which the offender stands convicted, be not of a highly aggravated character; if it appear that it was unpremeditated, or that he was overtaken in it through sudden or powerful temptation; if he receive the rebuke of the church with meekness; and especially, if he give satisfactory proof of penitence, by hastening to repair his wrong,—it is all that his brethren can demand. They are bound to retain him in their fellowship, and to treat him with the same brotherly kindness and consideration, that would have been due to him if he had never fallen. But if, after suitable time for reflection, he persist in disregarding the admonition of the church,—though his sin be not of the most flagrant kind, the fellowship of the body should be withdrawn from him. To avoid, if possible, a result so painful, or, if impossible, to secure harmony in this ultimate and final act of discipline,—it seems proper that any brother, desirous of making a still further effort to reclaim and save the wrong-doer, should be allowed a reasonable time to do so. It scarcely needs to be added, that the whole process should be conducted under a solemn conviction on the part of each, of personal responsibility; and that wisdom from above should be unitedly sought, in earnest, fervent prayer. (James 1:5; Matt. 18:19.) In short, all should be done in the name of our Lord Jesus

Christ, with special reference to his revealed will, and in such a manner as may be expected to receive his approbation. (1 Cor. 5 : 4, 5 ; Matt. 18 : 18, 20.)

The above remarks have respect to such offences as are not premeditated, habitual, or of a highly aggravated character. If the wrong perpetrated be one of peculiar flagrancy, like that of the Corinthian offender; (1 Cor. 5 : 1,)—if it be committed deliberately, and in accordance with a previous design, like that of Ananias and Sapphira; (Acts 5 : 9,)—or, if it be secretly practised, and persisted in until it can no longer be concealed; (Jude 4,)—a more summary process is required. In such cases, the admonition of the church, and the excommunication of the offender, should go together. Evidence of the criminal act being laid before the body, in the manner prescribed by the rule,—the brethren should not hesitate to put away from among them, at once, the wicked person who perpetrated it. (1 Cor. 5 : 4, 5, 13.) No profession of penitence on his part, should prevent his immediate separation from the body; because no such profession can be deemed credible, until corroborated by his subsequent conduct. To delay the act of excision, therefore, would be to expose the Christian name to odium and contempt. The opinion entertained by many, and sustained, as they think, by our Lord, in Luke 17 : 4, that all disciplinary action must be arrested if the offender do but say, he repents,—is evidently erroneous. It derives, in fact, no support from the passage to which they refer. “ And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again unto thee, saying, I repent;

thou shalt forgive him." According to this, there must be, not only a profession of repentance, but an actual "turning again,"\*—a practical proof that repentance truly exists. If such proof be given, and if it be of such a character as to be unquestionable, sincere disciplinary proceedings should cease, because the object of discipline is already accomplished. But in many cases, it is manifestly impossible that satisfactory proof of penitence should at once be given. It must be sought and found, if found at all, in the subsequent life of the offender.

If a church member come to his brethren, and voluntarily discloses to them the fact, till then unknown, that on a certain occasion, months or years before, he was betrayed into some flagrant sin,—for example, that of adultery; if, impelled by the power of conscience, and overwhelmed with a sense of the greatness of his wrong, he yield himself up to their disposal, earnestly desiring them to do with him what, in their judgment, the honor of the cause demands,—it can scarcely be doubted, even by the most uncharitable, that his repentance is genuine. The world itself, under such circumstances, will give him credit for deep and heart-felt contrition; and his brethren, if they deem a temporary exclusion necessary to the "clearing of themselves," will speedily remove the censure, and confirm their love to such an one, lest he should be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow. (2

\* True, *σπιρτρέψη* is to be understood in the physical sense, as in Acts 16: 18; yet the act of turning and saying, I repent, must be sincere; and of this, there must be satisfactory evidence.

Cor. 2: 7, 8.) But suppose this same church member, after living for years in the habitual practice of adultery, until at length his sin is providentially detected, comes to the church with professions of repentance, and claims, on the ground of that repentance, to be forgiven.. Can it be believed that he is sincere? Or can the church withhold its censures, without proclaiming to the world that its discipline is a contemptible mockery, and that, of whatever misconduct its members may be guilty, a word will atone for all?

Upon this subject, the following paragraph, from Fuller's circular, is worthy of the grave consideration of the churches. "We cannot but consider it as an error in the discipline of some churches, where persons have been detected in gross and aggravated wickedness, that their exclusion has been suspended, and in many cases omitted, on the ground of their professed repentance. While the evil was a secret, it was persisted in; but when exposed by a public detection, then repentance is brought forward, as it were, in arrest of judgment. But can that repentance be genuine, which is pleaded for the purpose of warding off the censures of a Christian church? We are persuaded it cannot. The eye of a true penitent will be fixed on the greatness of his sin; and he will be the last to discern or talk of his repentance for it. So far from pleading it in order to evade censure, he will censure himself, and desire nothing more than that testimony may be borne against his conduct for the honor of Christ. But allowing that repentance in such cases is sincere, still it is not of such account as to set aside the necessity of exclusion.. The end to be answered

by this measure is not merely the good of the party, but the clearing of a Christian church from the very appearance of conniving at immorality ; which cannot be accomplished by repentance only. Though Miriam might be truly sorry for her sin in having spoken against Moses, and though she might be healed of her leprosy,—yet the Lord said unto Moses, “ If her father had but spit in her face, should she not be ashamed seven days ? Let her be shut out from the camp seven days ; and after that, let her be received in again. (Numbers 12 : 14.)”\*

A full record of the proceedings in every case of discipline coming before a church, should be entered upon the church book for future reference ; and if it result in an act of excommunication, the grounds upon which that act was passed should be distinctly stated. It is submitted, whether, in case of the excommunication of a member, the fact should not be announced in the public congregation,—not only that the church may be vindicated from the suspicion of conniving at the wrong against which she thus bears her testimony, but also that she may not be held responsible for any future delinquency of which the offender may be guilty.

Such is the process of corrective discipline, as prescribed by the Christian law. Such is the rule which Christ himself has ordained, for the treatment of offences among his professed disciples, and upon the strict and faithful observance of which the purity and peace of his churches will be found greatly to depend. It is a universal rule,—applicable alike to all disciplin-

\* Works, vol. ii. p. 466.

able offences, whether private or public, whether personal or general. It is an impartial rule,—pointing out one mode of treatment for every offending church member, whether he occupy a private or an official station. The direction, "Against an elder receive not an accusation, but before two or three witnesses," (1 Tim. 5 : 19,) has indeed been thought to imply, that in the case of one who is not an elder, a less amount of testimony may be sufficient. But the rule demands, *in all cases*, "that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word should be established." Not only the original charge, but the additional one, of having disregarded the first or private admonition, must be thus supported. The passage quoted from the epistle to Timothy, seems to have been intended, not to secure to the elders a peculiar privilege, but to guard against encroachment, in their case, a right which they possessed in common with others. It might, perhaps, have been inferred by Timothy, from the high grade of Christian excellence required in the officers of the churches, (see chap. 3,) as well as from the obvious importance of their maintaining an unblemished reputation,—that the accusation of a single individual, though unsustained by other proof, would be a sufficient reason for proceeding against them. With a view, it may be, to prevent such an inference, and to secure to those who, from their very elevation, were peculiarly exposed to malicious assaults, an impartial and righteous judgment,—the apostle expressly forbids that a charge should be entertained against them, unless supported by the full amount of testimony required in every case by the rule.

In concluding this section, it should be observed, that no church member who is conscious of having committed a disciplinable offence, can rightfully receive the Lord's supper, or bear an active part in any public religious service, until he has confessed, and, if practicable, repaired his wrong. "Therefore," says our Lord, "if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath aught against thee, leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift." (Matt. 5:23, 24.) This injunction is binding upon the secret, as well as upon the open offender. Though his brethren be not grieved or offended, yet if he have given them occasion of grief or offence, he must not omit to offer satisfaction. Though they may not hold aught against him, yet if he remember that they have aught against him, he is under obligation to take it out of the way. Nor can he reasonably hope for acceptance with his Maker, until, in this respect, he is ready to comply with his righteous demands. The same rule is applicable to the supposed offender, in whose case a process of discipline is pending, even though he may be conscious of innocence. If his brethren have aught against him, though it be without just occasion, he ought to abstain from all active participation in the public services of religion, until the matter is satisfactorily arranged. Nothing, however, should be omitted on his part, to effect such an arrangement with the least possible delay. In the mean time, the brother against whom the trespass is committed, or, if it be not a personal offence, who feels himself aggrieved by it, is not

bound by this rule. The wrong of another can neither alienate his privilege, nor discharge him from his duty. It is not the offended, but the offender,—not the innocent, but the guilty,—who, until his sin is confessed and forsaken, is disqualified for communion with God in the ordinances of his house. To decline, therefore, as many do, a participation in the Lord's supper, because they may be apprised of some evil in a brother, is to pursue a course which the Scriptures nowhere authorize, and which, if generally adopted, must often lead to an entire suspension of that service. Church members who resort to this method of expressing their dissatisfaction, should be instructed in their duty; and if they refuse to perform it, they should themselves be dealt with as transgressors of the Christian law.

#### § 18. TREATMENT OF THE EXCOMMUNICATED.

The course to be pursued towards those who have forfeited their standing as church members, and upon whom the sentence of excommunication has been passed, is indicated in such Scriptures as the following: "Let him be unto the as an heathen man and a publican." (Matt. 18:17.) "Mark, and avoid them." (Rom. 16:17.) "Keep no company with such an one, no, not to eat." (1 Cor. 5:11.) "Note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother." (2 Thess. 3:14, 15.)

The first of the above passages evidently contemplates the mildest treatment which, in such cases, is allowable. Whatever the wrong may be, for which a church member is excluded, the effect of that exclusion is the same. The peculiar relation previously existing between him and his brethren, is from that moment dissolved. He ceases to be to them any thing more than an impenitent man, and an unbeliever ; and they are bound, in their future intercourse with him, to evince by their conduct that they regard him as belonging, not to the church, but to the world. They are not, indeed, to treat him with coldness, and haughty reserve. They should show him kindness, but not complacency. They should manifest towards him the tokens of benevolent regard, but not of approbation. In short, he should be in no way distinguished, as having once belonged to the church, from the unconverted in general. If such a distinction be made at all, it should be for other reasons, hereafter to be noticed. It is exceedingly important, as a means of securing the happiest effect of an act of excommunication, that all the members of the church should understand their duty towards the excommunicated, and act accordingly. If any of them treat him with the same frankness and cordiality of manner as before ; if they manifest towards him a fraternal and complacent regard ; or if, in any way, they seem to admit a claim on his part still to be recognized as a Christian disciple,—the evil tendencies of a course so injudicious will speedily be apparent. Encouraged by their ill-timed countenance and sympathy, he will be likely to persist in his wrong, to conceive a prejudice

against such of the brethren as maintain a more becoming reserve, and to hold in contempt the censure pronounced by the united voice of the body.\*

The injunction, "Mark, and avoid them," has special reference to that peculiarly malignant and dangerous class of offenders, who have not only forfeited and lost by their misconduct the fellowship of their former brethren ; but who, from hostility to the truth, or a desire to promote their own selfish purposes, are still aiming to cause divisions and offences among them, contrary to the doctrine of Christ.† Persons of this description, in the treatment they receive at the hands of Christians, should be distinguished from common sinners, by more decided and special tokens of disapprobation. Every church member should, if possible, shun them as he would the pestilence ; or if association with them, to some extent, be unavoidable, it should be manifest that he is apprised of the peril of listening to their insidious and artful sophistries, and vigilantly guarded against their corrupting influence.

For similar reasons, the Christian is forbidden to be on terms of familiar intercourse with such excommunicated persons as are habitually guilty of the grosser immoralities. "I have written unto you," says the apostle, "if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner,—not to keep company with such an one, no, not to eat." No church member can admit such persons to his intimacy, or mingle freely and with evident pleasure in their society,

\* See Fuller, as cited under § 16, 3.

† See § 16, 2.

without seeming to give countenance to their evil deeds. To some, it may seem surprising that so common and so reputable a sin as covetousness should be included in the above enumeration; but whoever reflects upon its pernicious character and tendency, as "the root of all evil," will perceive that the apostle had the best of reasons for placing it upon a level with the most detestable crimes. The same course of conduct, substantially, is to be observed towards persons excluded for loose and disorderly conduct,—idlers, busy-bodies, in a word, such as addict themselves to low and disreputable habits. So long as they continue to bear this worthless character, Christians are directed to "note them, and have no company with them, that they may be ashamed."

At the same time, they are not to be cast off, and utterly abandoned, as if they had fallen into a state of confirmed and irreconcilable enmity against God. In this respect, they are to be regarded as occupying a common level with all the unconverted; as living in sin, yet susceptible of being recovered to holiness; as remaining in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity, yet not excluded from the hope of forgiveness. At every convenient opportunity, therefore, so long as they will candidly listen to reproof, they should be affectionately and solemnly admonished to repentance. "Yet, count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother." It is not here implied, that the excommunicated person should be recognized as a *Christian* brother. What is intended is, that, *as a brother man*, he should be embraced in our benevolent sympathies and concern for his salvation.

The rule, then, for the treatment of the excommunicated, may be thus briefly stated: While it should be such, in all cases, as to evince a spirit of kindness, and a desire to do them good,—that desire should not lead us to such an intimacy with those who are seeking, by good words and fair speeches, to deceive the hearts of the simple, that they may do us hurt; that kindness should be mingled with such a degree of reserve, that it may not be mistaken for complacency, or in any way prevent the salutary influence which might otherwise be exerted by the censure of the church.

#### § 19. RESTORATION OF THE PENITENT.

We have seen that every part of the process of discipline, as prescribed in the rule of our Lord, is designed to be reformatory. Even the final act of exclusion is to be regarded, not as a penal, but a corrective measure. The offender is to be delivered unto Satan, for the mortification of his fleshly propensities, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord. Though strictly a vindictive act, so far as it concerns the purity and honor of the church, it was not intended to be a vindictive one, and should never be performed with vindictive feelings. One of the objects contemplated in it, should always be the offender's good; and it should be accompanied with earnest prayer that it may be sanctified to that end.\*

\* See § 13, 3.

If the act of excommunication be thus passed, and if the treatment of the excommunicated be such as is suggested above,—it may confidently be hoped that, in many instances, they will come again to the church, seeking, like the returning prodigal, a readmission to their Father's house. In such cases, if they give satisfactory proof of penitence, the church is bound to restore them to her fellowship. No movement of this kind, however, should be rashly ventured upon. To receive, in an ordinary business church meeting, the confession of an excluded person, and immediately to pass an act of restoration, while perhaps a majority of the members are absent, and know nothing of the matter,—cannot be otherwise than injudicious, and will seldom fail to disturb the harmony of the body. A widely different method of procedure should therefore be adopted. The whole church should have opportunity to hear the professed penitent; and when they act upon the case, it should be with the utmost coolness and deliberation. It should first be decided by vote, whether such proofs of penitence as appear, ought to be received as satisfactory. If any considerable number of the brethren are of opinion that they ought not to be so received, the question of restoration must of necessity be deferred. If, on the contrary, all are satisfied, or, if afterwards they become so, that question may then be acted upon without farther delay.

In the decision of cases of this nature, great caution is requisite. The disciples are called upon to judge, whether the confession presented flows from a broken heart and a contrite spirit, or whether it is a mere

expedient, by which the offender hopes to regain his standing in the church. Each should feel the difficulty of his position, and seek wisdom from above. It should be the purpose of each to judge righteous judgment. While, on the one hand, he should strive to divest himself of prejudice, and to put on that charity which hopeth all things,—he should entertain, on the other, so profound a regard to the honor of God and his cause, as not to be moved by tears and protestations of sorrow. Remembering “that nothing dries more quickly than a tear,” he should be satisfied only with those unequivocal tokens of genuine repentance, which consist in ceasing to do evil, and in learning to do well. If these tokens appear; if the offender have confessed, forsaken, and repaired, so far as this was practicable, his past wrongs; and if it be manifest that he is now aiming, by the help of God, to do right,—the censure inflicted by many has accomplished the purpose for which it was designed. They may remove it, and confirm their love to him. But so long as there remains a reasonable doubt that this object is effected, the act of absolution should not be passed. No injurious consequences need be apprehended from delay. The offender, if truly humbled and penitent, will be the last to complain, or to wish for a favorable decision in his case until the brethren are impelled to it by a sober conviction of duty.

Capricious and unreasonable objections to the restoration of a penitent offender, on the part of one or more individual members, should not be allowed to prevent such restoration, if, in the opinion of the body,

it ought to take place. The objectors should be patiently heard and answered; after which, if they still differ from their brethren, they should be required to yield their judgment to that of the church.

The act of restoration should be regarded as having respect merely to the common church relation. The person restored is reinstated by that act in all the rights and privileges of membership in the body, but not in any official station which he may have occupied previous to his exclusion. He can have no right to resume such station, or to exercise any of its functions, except through the suffrages of his brethren, subsequently given.

Should it be found, in any case, that through false accusation, or misapprehension, a church member has been wrongfully excluded, the church should be prompt to acknowledge and correct the error. No body of men, though acting with the best intentions, can claim infallibility in its decisions; and it seems proper that an excommunicated person, respectfully representing to the church from which he was expelled, that his case has been misunderstood, and that he is now able, by new testimony, to give it an entirely different aspect,—should be allowed a re-hearing. If he succeed in establishing his innocence, it is due to him that he be received again into fellowship, not by an act of restoration, but by a rescinding of the act of excommunication. Forgiveness, in this case, is insufficient to answer the demands of justice. He has a right to claim a sentence of full justification, and honorable acquittal; and that claim should be cheerfully granted.

## CONCLUSION.

In bringing this little work to a close, the writer would by no means conceal his anxiety that the principles which he has sought to illustrate and enforce, should obtain the candid consideration and favorable regard of the churches. Firmly believing these principles to be scriptural, he cannot doubt that a faithful observance of them, by any church, would be found highly conducive to its true prosperity; and, on the other hand, that their violation must be fraught with peril. While, therefore, he is happy to know that, to a considerable extent, they are already admitted, and at least partially acted upon,—he may be permitted to suggest to such as are accustomed to regulate their disciplinary movements by no rule, save their own discretion, some of the advantages to be derived from a strict conformity to the Christian law.

One of these advantages will be realized, in the diminished number of cases of discipline, demanding the action of the churches. The first or private admonition, if the rule be closely followed, in spirit as well as in form, will seldom fail to reclaim a delinquent member, unless there be in him some decided moral obliquity. The necessity of occupying the attention of the body, with matters which, if not unfriendly to its spirituality, must at least be exceedingly painful, will thus in a great measure be obviated.

The discipline of a church, if it be conducted according to the law of Christ, will be characterized by harmony, simplicity, and regularity. That law leaves

nothing doubtful, in respect either to the mode of disciplinary action, or to the spirit in which it should be performed. It points out distinctly, and in its natural order, whatever is to be done, together with the most direct and easy method of doing it. Nothing complex or confused is contained in it, or can result from it. While it is understood, and its authority acknowledged, no difficulty need be apprehended. There can be little occasion of disagreement among those who have only to obey; little room for disorder, where every movement is prescribed by a fixed rule. But suppose that rule to be disregarded, and every thing to be left to discretion. The discretion of a church, is the discretion of all its members. These will be likely to differ widely in their views of the expediency and propriety of any proposed measure. Some, perhaps, will give the preference to a method of proceeding, which, in the apprehension of others, must lead to most disastrous consequences. Complicated and difficult questions may arise, and lead to unprofitable strifes. Thus divided in judgment, and contending for the mastery, there is reason to fear that the decisions of the body may be swayed by party zeal, rather than by a conscientious regard to truth and righteoussness.

In proportion to the strictness with which the discipline of a church is conformed to the Christian law, will be its effectiveness. That law prescribes the method which our Lord himself has judged most happily adapted to accomplish the ends in view. Who, then, will presume to say that his judgment was erroneous, and that some other method will answer equally

well? Those who adopt another method, practically say this. Those who neglect to observe the rule, are guilty of this presumption. But, aside from the adaptation of the measures enjoined by the law, to effect the objects which it contemplates,—the fact that the disciplinary acts of a church are performed in strict obedience to that law, will give a force to its admonitions, and a weight to its censures, which it can derive from no other source. The church will feel a confidence in so acting; which could not otherwise be felt. A consciousness that, in what they do, they are sustained by divine authority, will relieve the disciples from that hesitancy and indecision, which they may well manifest in pursuing a different course from that indicated in the rule. At the same time, the offender cannot but regard what is done in strict accordance with Christ's instructions, as having received already the highest possible sanction,—in fact, as being done, in some sense, by Christ himself.

Among the advantages resulting from a faithful observance of the Christian law of discipline, the happy reflex influence, exerted upon all who have occasion to bear an active part in such discipline, ought not to be overlooked. Though they may be justly grieved, perhaps deeply injured, they can scarcely entertain a feeling of resentment towards the offender, while engaged in earnest and repeated efforts to promote his highest good. A service so godlike is utterly incompatible with the indulgence of malevolent passions. In the due performance of that service, these passions must be restrained and held in check; and he who is

thus acquiring the power to rule his own spirit, is at the same time attaining to a higher measure of greatness than he who taketh a city. (Prov. 16:32.)

In short, a band of Christian disciples, yielding a consistent and uniform obedience to the foregoing rules, exhibits the most attractive combination of moral strength and moral beauty that this world can afford. Such a church is like a well-trained and victorious army. Skilled in the use of the spiritual armor, and accustomed to act in concert,—its members, at the bidding of the Captain of their salvation, move forward in one unbroken phalanx to the conflict with the powers of darkness. In the name of Jehovah they set up their banners, and the weapons of their warfare are mighty, through God, to the pulling down of strong holds. Negligence, on the other hand, of the salutary rules of discipline ordained by Christ for the observance of his people, must inevitably be productive of disastrous results. By introducing corruption, disorder, and dissension into the churches, it will mar their beauty, and sap their strength; until, rendered incapable of united, vigorous, and well directed action, they are prepared to fall an easy prey to their enemies.

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